
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
天鏡のアルデラミン
VII
宇野朴人
Uno Bokuto
Illustration 竜徹
Alderamin on the Sky
VII
電撃文庫

Table of Contents


Once upon a time
Alderamin on the Sky
◆ヤトリシノ・イグセム（幼少期）
名家イグセム家出身の八歳の少女。バダ・サンクレイ大将が率いる帝国陸軍全域鎮台に遊学し、イクタ・サンクレイと出会う。
◆ユーカ・サンクレイ
バダの妻で、イクタの母。ヤポニク人。料理の上手な、内向的で慎ましやかな女性。夫と息子を心から愛している。
◆イクタ・サンクレイ（幼少期）
バダ・サンクレイの一人息子。八歳。行動力と好奇心に溢れたやんちゃな子供。のちに名字を、ソロークと改名することになる。
◆バダ・サンクレイ
精鋭部隊の帝国陸軍全域鎮台（通称：旭日連隊）をまとめる帝国陸軍大将。多くの部下に慕われる、ひょうひょうとした自由人。

Prologue

It felt like she had taken a long detour. As the dark sky slowly brightens, the petite girl with vermillion hair who was holding a rope started to think so.

「— Are we there yet?」

「Sorry, just a while more! We will reach soon!」

The girl frown suspiciously when she got the exact same answer as thirty minutes ago— when they set out from the village at the mid way point, the sky was completely dark. They just need to walk the remaining ten km or so to reach their destination. She was expecting to arrive before dawn.

However, the soldiers leading the way made excuse like 「the road condition ain't good」, 「there are reports of bandits」, and would make strange detours at every crossroads, resulting in them reaching far later than scheduled. The girl was growing suspicious.

「……」

She closed her eyes and referred to the map in her mind— After setting off from the Igsem manor, the girl had memorized the surrounding terrain. Thanks to that, even after making several detours, the girl could still grasp her own location. This was an extraordinary sense of spatial awareness for an eight year old child.

In conclusion, since an hour ago, they didn't get any closer or farther from their destination, and was just going in circles meaninglessly, making no intention of heading towards their goal. It was hard for the girl to understand— was there any point in going the long way for no reason?

「Could it be, I'm not welcomed?」

The girl asked forthrightly. At first, she suspect they were just making things hard for her. As someone from another faction

intruding on them as an exchange student, it was understandable that they would bully her. The military was very united, but on the other hand, they were harsh on outsiders— that was what her father taught her.

「Huh?—No!」 「Absolutely not!」

The soldiers shook their heads in a panic at her question, and seem to be sincere. The girl didn't recall being treated coldly by the soldiers either. Instead, they had taken care to make her feel comfortable since they first set out.

They weren't looking down on her just because she was a child. The girl's background and appearance, as well as her demeanour wouldn't allow it. She had an aura about her despite her young age. A mature young child— this wasn't enough to describe the infallible dignity of an Igsem.

「Ah— I-let's head left here! We will really reach soon!」

Following behind the soldiers, the girl turned left at the cross junction ahead. She confirmed with the map in her mind that they were finally moving towards their destination. They were supposed to enter from the west, but after making a large detour, they would enter from the east instead…

After walking for about ten minutes with their backs to the sun, when they were about to reach— the girl suddenly saw a strange sight.

「……?」

A bridge was erected over the road. Whether this description made sense aside, she couldn't find another way to explain it. A beautiful arc shaped structure was built over the ten metres road, or maybe it was the frame of a strange gate— if they continue walking, they would cross under it.

Feeling something was amiss, the girl walked closer, and found a large group had gathered under the arc gate. Some people in white

clothes were also bustling around in the military attired crowd. They seem to be performing some work at either ends of the arc gate.

「Hey— who are they?」

The girl asked the soldiers walking ahead. Their uniform plain clothing reminded her of Aldera pilgrims, but the atmosphere around them was different. She didn't think that arc gate was a religious structure either. She tilted her head bafflingly in the face of the 「existence」 she couldn't explain with her knowledge.

「They are from our Regiment, their preparations should be done…」

The leading soldier sneaking peeks at the rising sun behind them answered. 「Preparations?」 Right after the girl asked that, the soldiers suddenly stop and shouted in a loud voice:

「Hey～! We are here!」 「Is this spot okay～?」

They were about 30 m away from the arc gate, and the soldiers were confirming something from the group under the arc gate. An energetic came quickly: 「It's fine!」

What was going to happen— as the girl was about to ask, the three soldiers raised their right arm and pointed to the space above the arc gate:

「Here, please enjoy the view.」

The soldiers said with a smile. She was filled with doubt, the girl still looked at the direction they pointed, at the clear blue sky on the other side of the arc gate— and everything happened at that moment.

Water sprouts toward the blue sky from all over the arc gate with a clear swish. There seemed to be some sort of mechanism at the sprouts, which made the water spread out in a mist. The countless water droplets reflected the sunlight, and was shimmering in the girl's eyes—

「– Ah–」

She opened her crimson eyes wide as she stared at the strange mechanism, and the next moment, her eyes were drawn to the sky in front of her.

Without any warning— another bridge was formed in the sky. Red, orange, yellow, green— the bridge was made up of many overlapping colours, drawing a beautiful curve above the arc gate sprouting water.

A rainbow in the blue sky. She always thought it was a whimsical scene from nature.

Yatorishino Igsem witnessed for the first time— the science of rainbows.

「—」

Drawn by their light, she quietly spurred her horse forth to go under that bridge— the curiosity in her heart made her tighten her grip on her reins.

She had never seen a rainbow from right beneath it, or heard anyone who had done so. But if it was now, and it was the rainbow made by that arc gate, then going there would be the same as going through the rainbow—

As the girl moved forth with an expectant heart— the rainbow suddenly faded away before her eyes.

「— Ah!」

When she pulled her gaze away from the sky that had lost its colourful luster, she was near the crowd around the arc gate. She looked disappointed, and asked the group in uniform and white clothes on reflex:

「Is it gone?」

The first thing the vermillion haired girl said wasn't a formal greeting or self introduction, but a simple question. She was

probably under the charm of the rainbow— At this moment, a dark haired boy about the girl's age walked out of the crowd. He wasn't fazed by the water from the arc gate falling on him, and shook his head with a big smile.

「No, it's not gone. You just can't see it from here, try going back.」

「…?」

She was baffled, but the girl still did as she told, pulling the reins to make the horse back away. And— the scene that disappeared returned into sight. The multi coloured bridge across the side appeared at the same place unblemished.

「— What's going……」

「What's going on here? Is that what you want to know?」

The boy's smile suddenly turned mischievous, and said it before she did. The girl nodded forthrightly.

「That question is your gateway. If you want to know the answer, then come on over here.」

The boy beckoned her with a wave. Shaking away her short hesitation, the girl jumped off her mount, and walked under the arc gate with her own feet. The water rained down on her— as she felt the cool sensation on her cheeks, the boy and the people in white clothes yelled at the same time:

「「「「「「Welcome to the world of science!」」」」」」

The group in white clothes welcomed her, which puzzled the girl. As if he saw through what she was thinking, a man in military uniform said loudly from outside the wall of people:

「Ah～ sorry for scaring you. This is our way of welcoming guests.」

That man walked forth from the crowd, and the girl's first impression on him was that of a tired middle aged man. He wasn't

tall or short, and his body tone was very average. His jaw was wide and prominent, his pupils seemed smaller than average, and the corner of his eyes were drooping made him look as if he was pretending to be retarded.

His appearance didn't command much respect, but the girl didn't overlook the rank on the man's uniform because of the atmosphere. She straightened her back and saluted:

「I am Yatorishino Igsem, who has the fortune of coming to the Imperial All Territories Stronghold for an exchange study. You must be the Regimental Commander, General Bada. I apologize for my late arrival 」

「No, we are the ones who made you take the long way around to accommodate us. One of the water sprouts malfunctioned this morning, and we needed some time to repair it. Fortunately, things turned out well. My son was panicking right til the end.」

「I didn't panic! …I was just a little anxious.」

「Even though your underwear is completely drenched? —Sigh, let's leave that for later. The journey here is far, it must have been hard for you, Yatorishino.」

Bada said gently as if he was welcoming his own daughter, and then cast his gaze behind:

「And, welcome to the 『Rising Sun Regiment』. Including my son, many of us are looking forward to your visit. They might be a little noisy, but I will be glad if you can accommodate them without getting too annoyed by their antics.」

Bada Sankrei said with a big smile. Just like that boy, his smile seemed mischievous.

「On top of that, this might sound like I'm blowing my own trumpet— in terms of places for kids to visit, we are probably the army that is the most fun in the world.」

Chapter 1: The Daily Lives of the Rising Sun

A saber in the right arm, and a short sword in the left. Two figures holding wooden swords with differing lengths faced each other.

It was clear from their weapons that the two of them were from the same martial sect, but their body sizes were too different to describe them as mirror images.

On one side was a middle aged man over 6 feet tall, his toned muscles giving off the intimidating aura of steel; and opposite him— was a girl younger than ten.

「……」「—」

The two of them maintained a distance where they could hit the opponent by taking one stride forward, and evade by taking a step back. The morning sun shining through a tall window illuminate them. Their fiery red hair showed that their relationship wasn't just confined to their swordsmanship style.

They seemed to be still, but beneath the surface, they were going through an intense tactical battle. The shift in their gaze, the adjustment to their center of balance, and the change in their stances— observing the feints from reality, and finding the right moves by accumulating experiences. The two of them interacted in silence, practicing the 「martial arts」 that had been honed through centuries.

That was why the disadvantage of the girl was so obvious. For those who practice martial arts, it was hard to overcome the experience of one's elder. The overwhelming difference in physical built widen the gulf even more— However……

「……」

Despite all that, the crimson eyes of the girl wasn't tainted with the slightest thoughts of giving up. She was here to win, and holding her swords to defeat the opponent before her— even if her foe was known to be the strongest creature on the face of the earth.

In that instant— the light shone into that man's eyes. The sun rising, the window and the man's face were connected by a single line, and the rays from the sky scorched his vision mercilessly.

「Tsu—!」

The girl used this chance to close in on her opponent, and switch her footing nimbly from left to right. She thrust her short sword in place of her saber, to parry the slash coming at her shoulder.

The short sword blocked the blow, and the power behind the strike made her wrist creak. The girl twists her entire body to defuse the impact that was too much for her growing body. When the burden on her wrist was gone, the girl knew her plan worked. The strike at the right feet by the man didn't hit her as she had switched her stance.

The girl was now in front of the man's right feet, and was right inside of his guard.

「Hahh!」

The girl went on the offensive immediately. She stretched out the joints of her body that was bent to block the previous blow, and aimed the saber in her right hand at the opponent's right flank in an upward slash. The wide chested man didn't swing his saber at the opponent right before him, and it would be difficult for him to parry the short sword coming right at him.

The man didn't flinch— and used his armpit to clamp down on the girl's deadly counter.

「—!」

The girl opened her eyes wide in surprise. Her simultaneous thrust attack was dodged by him too. The slash that should have cut through her opponent's chest was trapped by tight muscles.

The girl immediately made the decision to let go of her saber, but before that happens, the man's short sword was already on her neck.

「… I concede.」

She said with a sigh. With the match decided, the man quietly put his blades away.

「— Attacking when the chance arises is a good idea, but that makes it easy for others to read your movements. Before going for the kill, you should add at least one other step.」

「Yes!」

「You were doing well before closing in, especially the stance change and use of the sun was praiseworthy. Continue working hard and improve.」

Solvenares Igsem offered simple feedbacks as he looked at his daughter. Reaffirming how much better her father was once again, Yatorishino perked herself up.

The morning training ending with a spur between parent and child was a routine— but today, Solvenares didn't leave after that.

「…? What's the matter, Father?」

The puzzled Yatorishino asked, and after thinking about it quietly for a few seconds, he spoke again:

「Someone has invited you for an exchange study. It will last for about three months.」

When she heard a term not in her vocabulary, the vermillion haired girl was baffled.

「Sorry father. What is an exchange study?」

「To leave here and head elsewhere to study.」

「So a transfer to another posting?」

Solvenares nodded at his daughter's description. As her education had prioritized military terms, Yatorishino's vocabulary was very unbalanced right now.

「There's no problem with interpreting it that way.」

「I understand. I will go anywhere as per my orders.」

His daughter answered with a salute, but the father's face turned gloomy. Yatorishino felt this was a strange reaction, it was rare seeing her father look troubled.

「This isn't an order. They want to know your opinion.」

「Huh?」

「That means, you can go if you want to, I won't force you.」

Solvenares said in a tone he wasn't used to, and Yatorishino was baffled too. For their family that followed the traditional military lifestyle, 「you can go if you want to」 was as foreign to her as another language.

Seeing that the vermillion haired girl was dumbstruck, the father realized he didn't provide enough information, and continued:

「The destination is the Independent Imperial All Territories Stronghold garrisoned in the Amibara province to the east, also known as the 『Rising Sun Regiment』.」

When she heard that name, Yatorishino opened her eyes wide on reflex:

「That elite unit commanded by General Bada Sankrei?」

「That's right. The invitation is from the General himself.」

The additional information surprised the girl even more. At this moment, her father asked again:

「Well then, what do you think?」

「I want to go on this exchange study, of course.」

Yatorishino answered clearly. She didn't know how this invitation came about, but she understood that this was a great opportunity for her to learn. Since this came from her father, there was no point doubting about ulterior motives.

「I heard they are at the forefront of military technology, so there must be a lot of things I can learn.」

「You are right, however…」

The man was hesitant to speak. Those who knew how he normally acts could tell that this wasn't like him at all. Yatorishino was getting confused, but her father noticed that and shook his head lightly:

「… No, since you are willing, then the matter is decided. Your visit will be three weeks at the soonest, so go over there and learn well.
」

Solvenares turned and left after saying that. As he was about to exit the dojo, with one foot in the corridor, he said one last time:

「However, no matter what you learn, do not forget that you are an Igsem.」

To be frank, Yatorishino didn't understand why her father said that at the end. Just like the children of a lion would also be a lion, she knew that she was born as an Igsem. She believed that deeply.

However— In that afternoon after reaching the 「Rising Sun Regiment」 base, she quickly understood why her father felt troubled.

「……General Sankrei.」

「Just call me Uncle Bada. What is it, Yatorishino-chan?」

She felt uneasy about the way he addressed her, and the way he wanted to be addressed, but the vermillion haired girl set all that aside for now and asked while looking up.

「What are they doing?」

A inflated air bag was floating in the sky, and a dark haired boy was hanging on a rope tied to it. Ten or so men and women in white clothes stood below the airbag, and the boy was waving at them about five metres above the ground.

「I'm sending my son off to fly.」

Bada answered nonchalantly. After hesitating for a moment, Yatorishino said cautiously:

「From what I can tell, that ball thing look very similar to the balloon used by Kioka.」

「You are really knowledgeable. That's right, the principles are the same.」

「In that case— I remember that the laws of the Empire prohibits the production and use of balloons.」

The fact that something illegal was happening before her troubled the girl. The man with the highest rank in the Imperial military crossed his arms seriously and clear his throat.

「Let me give you a lesson here. Well～ in military terms, a 『Balloon』 is an airbag filled with Dynamic Air and a basket to carry people.」

「That's what I heard.」

「However, the airbag in front of us only have my son who is at his rebellious age on it, the crucial basket to carry people isn't there. Don't you think calling this half baked thing a balloon will make people mad?」

「……」

Yatorishino furrowed her brows. At this moment, the boy was making all sorts of pose to entertain the crowd, but she didn't pay attention as she was too engrossed with this topic.

「Hence, that is not a balloon. Something that is not a balloon floating in the air isn't illegal. So my son can fly safely in the air. Yup.」

As she looked at Bada looking up to the sky with a smile, pretending to not know, the girl pressed her temple and fell into deep thought. She felt she shouldn't accept that explanation, but she was only eight and didn't understand this concept of cheating known as 「sophistry」.

「Do you want to give it a try?」

「Huh?」

「Try it out. Even someone as outstanding as you won't have any experience flying in the sky, right?」

Bada pointed at his son and said with a smile. Yatorishino quickly answered:

「If that is an order, I will give it a try.」

The girl stared at the boy floating in mid air and answered without any fear. when he heard that, Bada smacked his forehead with a bitter smile:

「— I see～ Yup, you really are Sol's daughter.」

「What do you mean?」

「I have underestimated Sol's education. It's nothing, don't mind me.」

As the two of them spoke, the boy hanging from the floating airbag was pulled down to the ground by men in white standing by at the side. After his safety harness was removed, he ran straight towards Yatorishino and Bada.

「Hmmp! How's that, isn't it amazing? We only flew this high this time, but we can go higher if we want to. We can even go above the clouds!」

The excited boy ran on and on— Yatorishino then gave a serious salute to Ikuta Sankrei who was about her age.

「You have shown me a truly rare sight. I have a question about this.」

「Hmm, what? Ask away!」

「That balloon… No, that transport vehicle, what is it designed for? Can you tell me how to use this in a practical way?」

Yatorishino was here to literally learn, so she asked a serious question. The boy said 「wait」, then ran back to the men in white:

「I want to ask! What is 『Floating-kun number seven』 used for?」

「Hmm? It can do many things.」「You can get the high ground no matter where you go, so it can be used for military sentry or reconnaissance.」「No, that didn't get approved because of pressure from the church.」「I don't think we can deploy this for battle in the Empire.」「Why not put it to commercial use?」「Like sending supplies far away?」「No. It can't carry enough load, so the cost to value ratio is too high.」「It will be easier to make maps by looking down from the sky.」「You know that maps are military secrets, right?」「That seems so boring～」「Isn't there a happier way of using it?」

With that one question as a catalyst, the men and women in white started their debate. The boy also joined in, and it ended after a few minutes. This time, he and everyone else ran to Yatorishino.

「We have discussed, but it's hard to come to a conclusion. What do you think?」

The vermillion haired girl didn't expect to be questioned, and open her eyes wide. They all looked very serious, and influenced by the mood, Yatorishino answered after giving it some thought.

「… For example, transporting supplies to places with different altitude?」

「「「「「「「That's it!」」」」」」」

Everyone clapped their hands at the same time, and the noisy discussion started again around the girl:

「Vertical transportation is a blind spot.」「If we don't ferry people, we can fudge it with the church.」「It will be necessary for mountainous regions.」「You want to market it to the Shinnack?」「I just went there recently, what a pity.」「If we want to do that, we would have to get permission from the Northern Territory Stronghold.」「Let's market it to that Stronghold too, and promote it for mountain warfare preparations.」「Didn't I just tell you we can't use it for military purposes?」「Their commander is an idiot anyway.」「Why don't we sell military supplies to both sides?」「I know, but that's just fraud.」

Scientist expressed their views in a heated discussion. Overwhelmed by the atmosphere, Yatorishino asked them a simple question:

「… Could it be, that you are making something without deciding on its use first?」

「To them, the uses aren't important, what's important is what they want to make, and what they can learn from that.」

Bada who was standing beside shrugged. The group in white showed brilliant smile:

「That's right, after all, we are—」「「「「Scientists!」」」」

They announced proudly as one. As she looked at the happy group, Yatorishino felt even more confused.

After observing 「Floating-kun number seven」 outdoors, Bada left for the moment, leaving Yatorishino and the others who headed for the Science Laboratory. Over there, she faced the abnormality

mixed into the military organization— the study known as 「Science 」.

「Ohh! You are! That rumoured! Guest right! Well! Met!」

An energetic old man in white clothes stood inside with his back straight, with two other young Scientist who were busy shaking a pot sealed with a cover. There were the sloshing sound of water and sound of hard objects banging loudly inside. The pot seemed really heavy, and the three of them looked exhausted.

「I am! Anarai Khan! A representative! Of the Scientists! Just call me! Professor Anarai!」

「I'm Yatorishino Igsem. Nice to meet you, Professor Anarai.」

The vermillion haired girl saluted. At this moment, Anarai put down the pot.

「Huff! Puff… I-Ikuta, switch with me～」

「Yes, leave it to me!」

Ikuta took over Anarai's place, and started shaking the pot with the other two person. He had to use all his might because of the difference in stature, but the boy still took on this important task with everything he got.

「What is that?」

Unable to tell the meaning behind this job, Yatorishino asked on reflex. Taking a seat in one of the folding chair laid out by his disciples, Anarai wiped the sweat from his brows and answered:

「Well. Egg yolk, milk, sugar and a little bit of cinnamon— We put about a litre of this in a container, then placed it into the pot along with salted ice water.」

Yatorishino tried imagining that, but didn't understand what that meant. Why were they cooling down this mixture of milk? If they want to drink iced milk, they could just add ice cubes to the milk. There was no need to do all this.

The girl wanted to ask further, but stopped herself. Because there was a more fundamental question in her mind.

「Professor, can I ask something?」

「You have another question huh. Don't worry, ask away— Oh, sorry, can you shake that a little further away?」

Ikuta's group who was making clunking noise with the pot moved further into the room. After glancing their way, Yatorishino asked:

「Then I won't hold back— what is science?」

When he heard this direct question, Anarai placed his hands on his knees with a faint smile:

「Do you know the principle behind making rainbows?」

「No. That rainbow earlier surprised me.」

「Yes. I was the same in the past. When I was a child, the colourful bridge in the sky would always seem incredible to me. I tried running to the end of the rainbow more than once. And of course, I never succeeded.

After doing that repeatedly, just watching couldn't satisfy me anymore. I want to know how, and why the rainbows appear— if it was you, what would you do?」

「First, I will ask the adults around me.」

「Smart. But what if the adults couldn't answer?」

The old man continued with a gentle voice. After thinking for a moment, the girl answered:

「… I will find a chance to ask a priest.」

「I did that too.」

A nostalgic wry smile appeared on Anarai's face, and he grunted.

「The priest I asked was someone great at preaching in the streets, respected by the people and held a high rank. He would lecture me

whenever I met him, and to me back then, he was a difficult person to deal with.

Anyway, that man was the most knowledgeable person I knew. With his broad knowledge of the Aldera religion, he was the best suited to enlighten me. However—」

The old man stopped here and sighed:

「— If I obtained an answer then, things would be simple. But in response to my question, the priest answered with a smile: 『Rainbows are a blessing from god. When god feels at peace, He will show His love through this manner』.」

Anarai looked at Yatorishino with eyes filled with wisdom:

「Can you accept this explanation?」

The vermillion haired girl thought for a moment, then shook her head clearly:

「It feels like… he avoided the question with that answer.」

「You are able to articulate the place that seemed wrong, you are smarter than I was back then.」

After laughing softly in self mockery, Anarai cast his gaze to the ceiling:

「I couldn't do it during my childhood. I couldn't accept the priest's answer back then, but I couldn't point out what the problem was. And of course, I still gave my rebuttal. According to my experiences back then, rainbows usually appear after it rains, with the sun behind me. Somethings, on the outside of a clear rainbow, there would be another set of vague rainbow. I also found some other clues and things in common, and told the priests everything. I already made preparations in my own way before I asked him the question.

But after that priest heard everything I said, he said again confidently, 『all this is the way god show us his love』.」

The old man’s fists on his knees started quivering, and the frustration he felt back then appeared clearly on his mind again:

「I couldn’t take it anymore and finally shouted— 『Then bring that god guy here!』」

His hoarse voice reverberated in the room. Realizing that he had lost his composure, the old sage tried to cover it up by clearing his throat, while Yatorishino asked nervously:

「… What happened after you shouted that?」

「I was given a beating. When my parents heard about it, they sent me to bed without dinner as punishment.」

Anarai stuck his tongue out to conclude his tale, and the girl chuckled softly.

「In the end, I learned through this incident— that the most infuriating thing was the priest use the phrase 『work of god』 as the perfect explanation. That guy seems capable of everything, and can solve any problem given to him. Be it the sun rising from the east, the moon setting from the sky, the couple next door quarreling everyday, just saying it’s the work of god and it will all be settled. I’m so moved that I’m in tears.」

The old man pressed the inside corners of his eyes and said in a low voice.

「But… What’s the point of doing that?」

「……」

「Everything is the work of god, that is a great explanation. But what happens after that? Since you can’t bring the all crucial god over, then isn’t that another way of saying 『I don’t know anything』? If we accept this and stop thinking, what kind of answer can we get? How can we ever create that rainbow!?

When I realized my frustration towards theology, I set a condition for myself. I won’t use god as the reason of explaining any

phenomenon— Simply put, 『it's unsightly to depend on god』. And this is the incident that directly led to the development of 『science』 in my heart.」

He got up from his chair slowly, and surveyed his disciples walking around the room.

「We scientists will challenge all the mysteries in this world. We won't depend on the all encompassing answer that god did it, and will use every means possible to seek the truth. We might develop many technology during the process, but in the end, these are only by products, a stepping stones towards the next truth. Outsiders are free to use these technology as they wish.

The eyes of the scientists will only be fixated on 『truth』. This never ending research is our only desire! That's how me and those guys, the 『Disciples of Anarai』 live ourselves—Uwah?」

「Hey, you are in the way, Professor! It's cramp here, don't spread out your arms!」

One of the scientist carrying research materials shoved his teacher's shoulder aside and walked passed him. When his signature line got interrupted, the old sage looked at her moodily:

「Hey Nazuna… I just got to the coolest part…」

「Yes yes yes. Professor, the more cool you think you are, the more likely you will ignore your audience. It's the same this time too. Have you considered her age before speaking?」

The woman named Nazuna didn't hesitate in lecturing her teacher who was much older than her. Anarai snapped out of his thoughts and looked back to his conversation partner. The vermillion haired girl shook her head, telling him that it was fine:

「… There are some terms I didn't understand, but I get the gist of what you are saying. I might misunderstand some parts, but the study of science— are deliberate attempts to analyze and explain

phenomenons that are dismissed by theology as 『works of god』, correct?」

Yatorishino cautiously measured her words, and expressed the definition of science in her own simple words. The scientists around her all stared with their eyes wide:

「I'm impressed… This child is really bright.」

「Hmm, that surprised me.」

While they were talking, the trio who had moved deep into the room came back. They carefully lowered the pot onto the floor with their last bit of strength, and collapsed onto the ground.

「Huff～Puff～… I think, it's almost done…」

「Ohh, thank you for your hard work. But Bajin, you are panting too hard.」

「Don't complain after dropping out halfway! I shook this for more than 30 minutes!」

「Bajin-nii, you haven't change your habit of making strange faces when you get tired? It feels yucky whenever I see it.」

「Ikuta, even you are saying that? I will cry, you know?」

The dark haired boy teased his senior as he took off the rope and wax paper around the pot cover. The ice in the pot were about 60% melted, and a steel bucket far smaller than the pot were floating in the salt water. Ikuta lift up the bucket with both hands:

「… Hmm, I don't feel anything moving inside. This should be…」

The boy opened the catch on the lid, grabbed onto the edge of the bucket and pulled hard. The cover then opened with a pop, and the interior of the bucker was unveiled to Yatorishino watching from the side. Curiously, there weren't any liquid inside, and in its place, some sort of milky white substance covered the inner walls of the bucket.

「It turned out great! Come, get the plate and spoon! Quick, quick!」

Nazuna took out the utensils from the kitchen cabinet as requested. Ikuta took the proffered plate, and used the spoon to scoop the milky white substance onto the plate.

「And it’s done! Here, you try it first!」

Ikuta offered her the small plate and a spoon with a bright smile. Yatorishino took them, and then stared at the curious object on the plate.

「This is… some sort of iced dessert?」

「Instead of asking, it will faster to eat it. Have a taste!」

The boy urged her again, and she made up her mind, stabbing the spoon into the pile of milky white substance. It felt slightly more vicious than congee, and she easily scooped up one mouthful.

「… I’m digging in.」

Under the watchful eyes of the scientists, Yatorishino finally sent the goo into her mouth. The unique icy sensation of the dessert spread from the top of her mouth— and the next instant, an incredible sweetness melted on her tensely waiting tongue.

「……?」

An impact she had never felt before ravaged, the girl’s oral cavity. The aroma of milk and cinnamon spread in her nose. After the strong sweetness melted completely away, she felt a refreshing and loving carass slip down her throat.

「—!—」

The vermillion haired girl couldn’t make any sound for quite a while. She had never imagined that eating something could invoke such a strong emotion within her.

After taking a long time to savor her first bite completely, she quietly turned her eyes back onto the plate, and stuck her spoon into that amazing substance. When the second spoonful fell on her

tongue, the taste became more prominent as it overlaps with her memories of her first taste.

After that, she couldn't stop. Caught in the torrent of sweetness and joy, time passed in a flash. When she realized it, Yatorishino retracted her spoon from the empty plate, and appeared to be lost in a daze.

「— One more plate?」

The boy answered with a bright smile as he stuck his spoon into the bucket. The old sage in white looked up with his chest held high and said gleefully:

「How about that, the guy named god!? There isn't such a taste in your realm of expertise, right!?」

The tour of the base filled with surprises continued, and a welcome party was held at night. Everyone gathered around a barbeque pit to sing and party for the night. Aside from the scientists, 40 other soldiers joined too. Their ranks and age all differed, but all the soldiers showed a 「special trick」 to hype up the mood— I heard that they were selected based on how interesting their idea was.

When all the programs ended, Yatorishino was brought to her dormitory. As she laid on her bed in the dark room, she couldn't help thinking seriously— that this exchange study might be completely different from what she expected.

The next morning, she woke up at 5am before the day break, dressed quickly and returned to her usual pacing after getting it completely disrupted the day before. Yatorishino carried her sack, exited the room without waking the other female soldiers, and left the dormitory. The cool air unheated by the sun caressed her cheeks, and the buildings placed around the base according to their functions spread before her eyes.

「Oh, Good morning.」 「You sure are up early. Did you sleep well?」

「Good morning. Thanks to everyone, I slept very well.」

After exchanging greetings with the two female soldiers on sentry duty, the girl asked politely:

「If it is not too much trouble, I would like to do some morning training. Is there any empty space that don’t have much people?」

「Let’s see… how about the space behind the dorm?」 「Yes I think that will work. If anyone wants to go over, I will call them.」

Yatorishino thanked the two of them and made her way behind the dormitory. She swiftly surveyed the surrounding terrain, then stood in the center of the vacant space and took out two wooden swords from her sack. With the saber in her right hand and short sword in her left, she took a natural pose and closed her eyes.

「… Outside a house, chaotic battle. Seven enemies—」

Yatorishino muttered to herself and focused— several enemy figures appeared in her mind like candles being lit. They either held swords, spears or crossbows. They surrounded the girl in formation, and emitted merciless killing intent.

The seven formless enemy surrounded the girl. Suddenly a spearman attacked the girl. The girl twisted her waist and thrust at his chest, and the morning battle started.

「Tsh–!」

This was one of the Igsem’s training method passed down the family, called 「mind battle」. As the name implies, it involve fighting formless enemy created by one’s imagination. This wasn’t too different from the image training used by other martial arts, but she took it to a different level.

「Mind Battle」 was the foundation of Igsem swordsmanship, and the irreplaceable secret to them becoming the strongest warrior. It surpasses mental preparation for battle, and realized the concept of allowing one to always be in a battlefield. Those who master this skill

could accumulate experience even without a sparring partner, which was absolutely necessary to become a veteran warrior.

「Fu…!」

Up until this stage, all this was within the realm of sanity. A precondition of experiencing a real fight through 「Mind Battle」, was that the imaginary enemy had to present a threat. There was no point in defeating enemies that had been reduced to mere strawman.

There were two important criteria to sculpt a great imagination. One would be the experience of observing the battles of many martial artists, and she had no problems with that regards. Born and raised in the Igsem house, she had seen countless martial artists invited by his father for sparring sessions. Her experience would accumulate with time, and the enemy in her imagination would become more detailed.

Two— the steel-like restrain to not go easy on herself.

「Hahh!」

After blocking the horizontal sword slash with her short sword, she severed the enemy's thigh arterary when she passed him by. The spear thrust from behind glazed her flank, and the searing pain from her wound stung her nerves. Yatorishino gritted through the pain and continue moving— she renacted her own pain and injury without any reservation either.

To avoid being encircled, she kept moving. Yatorishino kept an eye on the crossbowmen who would shoot if she showed an opening, and cut down one opponent after another. The enemy was set to be slightly stronger than what she could handle right now, and she would be checkmate if she made one false move.

「—Phew—!」

The sixth man attacked while she was slashing at the fifth. After her counterattack that bordered on a double KO succeeded,

Yatorishino could feel blood dripping from her wounded flank and calf, then turned to the last crossbowman ten or so metres away.

As she charge over to settle the match, the enemy shooter's murderous intent penetrate the girl's entire body. Knowing instinctively that she couldn't avoid the shot with her leg wound, she shielded her heart with the short sword in her left hand. The crossbowman realized that he would be defeated if he miss the shot, and adjusted his aim for the other fatal target— the head.

Yatorishino instantly blocked the bolt she baited her opponent into firing with her saber. She had not master the skill of 「Arrow Deflection」, but if she knew where the enemy was aiming, she could pull off something similar. Sensing that the deflected bolt had whizzed past her cheeks and flew into the distance, the girl step into killing range and slashed.

「Hahhh!」

She cut her opponent's wrist, then slashed at the neck. As per her father's instructions, Yatorishino struck a fatal blow at the disabled foe's neck, without letting her guard down. The sensation of cutting through the spinal column told her that the match was over, and she stopped— However, she was suddenly aware of an eighth enemy figure.

「……?」

The strict self suggestion made her enter a state similar to a real battle, and the girl failed to realize the contradiction in this situation. She simply judged that there was still an enemy left standing, and slashed without hesitation at that presence.

「Huh—?」

Her opponent showed no signs of resistance, and blurted out stiffly.

Yatorishino realized at that crucial moment that something was amiss, and stopped the movement of her entire body. After straining

her muscles close to the point of breaking, her saber stopped just short of her opponent's neck.

「No— Sorry, I'm not good with playing with swords.」

The air of battle disappeared like a fading fog, and reality was reflected in her crimson eyes once more— the boy she met yesterday was standing there with his hands up like a prisoners begging for his life.

「— I'm very sorry.」

Realizing her mistake, the vermillion haired girl kept the wooden swords into her waist and bowed her head in apology. Ikuta opened his eyes wide troubledly in response to her reaction:

「Huh? Erm, why are you apologizing?」

「I was too engrossed in my training and almost hurt you.」

「Training… Oh, that's right. I heard your family is famous for swordsmanship. I am the one that is bothering you.」

The boy scratched his head bashfully, and was shocked when he looked at the girl again:

「… Hey! Your arm and stomach are hurt!」

Dark red bruises had appeared on the places he pointed out, and Yatorishino shook her head lightly.

「This is nothing. It's something like a bruise, and will fade with time.」

These were the marks of the wounds she suffered during the Mind Battle. As the girl's image training was too realistic, even her own body thought it was wounded. Ikuta said bafflingly:

「Is that so…? But that looks painful. Let's put some medicine on it, here.」

The boy took out a small, round wooden box after saying that, offering it to the girl after opening the lid.

「This is a special paste made by our Regiment, I can guarantee its effectiveness. I often use when I fall from trees or things like that.」

「Is that so? I will accept your kind offer then.」

Yatorishino accepted his help docilely. She scoop up some paste and spread it on the bruise on her body. Ikuta looked at her intriguely, then groaned:

「Can't you change the way you speak… Aren't you the same age as me?」

When she heard that, the vermillion haired girl stopped applying the paste and looked straight back at Ikuta.

「Is the way I speak strange?」

「It's not weird, but it feels stiff. Stiffer than a brick. No matter how prim and proper you are, shouldn't you be more casual with people with similar standings?」

Yatorishino's face turned gloomy and lowered her head at that question.

「… Before this, I have never met anyone that is close to me in age and standings.」



「Don't you play with friends? By the way, how do you usually spend your time?」

「Aside from swordsmanship and all short of close combat training, I also learn about military knowledge and doctrines.」

「Swords and studies… Other than that?」

「Aside from training and classes, meal and rest are scheduled efficiently too.」

Yatorishino answered matter of factly, which made Ikuta cross his arms with a moan:

「… I can't imagine such a lifestyle at all, but I understand that you are completely serious.」

「I always tell the truth.」

「I think so too. In that case… you simply don't know how to play.」

After interpreting her personality like that, the youth looked at the girl with a smile:

「Anyway, you can start by playing with me.」

「Is this part of the 『exchange study』?」

「I think… it does. The kanji 『Yu』 is in there after all.」

「Then I will agree with your proposal. But specifically, what should we do?」

「Well, about that, my Dad actually gave me this.」

Ikuta took out a paper folded into a quarter, laid it out and frowned.

「Maybe it's because you are here, the tasks today are difficult.」

「… What do we need to do?」

「We will carry out the orders on this paper. Mission one, 『Make Major Guihan fall into a hole』.」

The boy led Yatorishino to hide in a bush beside the road for some reason.

「… Fall into a hole, what does that—」

「Shush! The Major is here!」

He cut off the girl's question in a sharp tone. In front of the two of them, a middle aged man was walking out of a building that appears to be the officer's dormitory. He stretched his back at the entrance, and walked towards the two of them.

「He is someone who follows his routine strictly, and will come out to stretch at this time. When the Major takes off his shirt, you can see his six pecs. Isn't that amazing?」

Alright～ after the youth explained that with a smile, his eyes turned serious:

「I already set the trap, so think of this as a demonstration… I'm getting a little nervous.」

Yatorishino turned her eyes back seriously after hearing that, and saw Major Guihan stopping in his track after realizing something was wrong with the ground.

「… Hmm? This is…」

The Major stopped in front of the spot where the earth was of a different colour, and grunted.

「… That Ikuta brat is playing pranks again.」

The Major saw through the trap with a glance. Since he mentioned 'again', this wasn't the first time he tried something like this. Yatorishino thought as she glanced at the boy.

「But it is obvious that the dirt had been dug up here, which means it will be safe if I stay clear of it—」

Major Guihan walked towards the left to go around it. But instead of stepping down, he stamp down at the earth before him:

「— That is just a disguise, the real trap is over here!」

The dirt on the surface flew off, revealing the trap made with branches and leaves below. The joy of seeing through this two layer trap made the Major put his hands on his waist and laugh out loud:

「Hahaha, as I expected! Don't think I will fall for the same thing twice!— Hey, you are peeking from somewhere, right!? Give up and show yourself!」

The Major raised his voice and shouted out. Ikuta who was hiding in the bushes stood up obediently:

「—Ehh～ You saw through that? I thought it would work today too～」

「So that's where you are hiding! Hahaha, don't look down on your elders!」

Ikuta clicked his tongue and walked towards his opponent who was beaming with joy. As the boy walked slowly, Major Guihan also walked towards him while flexing his muscles meaninglessly:

「Okay, have you braced yourselves? Since I saw through the trap, you will have to follow me for morning train uwah!」

His body sunk right to his waist mid sentence. The boy raised his fist.

「Yes, just as I planned!」

「W-What? What～!」

「I won today too! If two layers don't work, then I just need to set a three layered trap. Don't assume I will use the same traps twice!」

Ikuta puffed his chest out proudly after saying that, then squatted down and pulled out a paper and pen:

「Here Major, sign here. This is the fourth time, you should have gotten used to it.」

「Damn it…!」

He was grinding his teeth from frustration, but the Major concede and did just that. After taking the signed paper, the boy said 「Thanks!」, then turned and went back to Yatorishino.

「So, that's the first mission. Sigh～ I'm glad it went well. It will be ugly if I fail right from the start.」

Even if he said that, the vermillion haired girl wasn't sure how she should reply. Ignoring her confusion, Ikuta continued to speak cockily:

「There are four other similar missions. Do you understand now? You have to help for the next one too!」

「Just to be clear, this is a high risk mission.」

Next, Yatorishino was brought to the center of the base, where the kitchen and dining area was. The went around to the back of the building, and Ikuta immediately said in a quietly voice:

「The mission details are simple, just steal the listed ingredients from the kitchen… However, there's a terrifying sentinel in there.」

The boy told her as he looked up at the window. As they stood on the crates stacked near the wall, they peeked inside the room. Inside was a buffed old lady, who was glaring at the pot as if it had murdered her father.

「You can see, right? That's the chief cook Mariban Susa, also known as Grandma Mari, top 3 in danger level within the Regiment. She would show no mercy to anyone who messes with her kitchen. Anyone who sneaks a bite would get at least a few slaps to the face and kneeling in the corner for two hours. If she caught someone stealing ingredients—」

Ikuta stopped at this point, and made a gesture of slicing his throat with his thumb:

「— We might become breakfast.」

His tone sounded so serious that Yatorishino couldn't help gasping. After turning her gaze back to the kitchen, she asked:

「… By the way, is it really fine for us to take these items?」

「Of course it's OK. This is a prank by my Dad in the first place.」

「Since this is the order of the Regimental Commander, why don't we just ask for it directly?」

「That's where you are wrong. Listen, it will be fine if we don't get detected before leaving the kitchen. However, it will be terrible if we get found out. It's a success if we don't get detected, but if we get caught, then this mission doesn't exist at all. There are some jobs where we have to complete them while keeping it a secret from everyone, correct? I remember in the army it's call assi… No, asspi, that's not—」

「Espionage assignment?」

「That's right, something like that. Anyway, we have to steal the ingredients. We either enjoy a sumptuous breakfast, or get eaten as breakfast— that's the only two options available to us.」

When they saw Grandma Mari's eyes came their way, the two of them quickly duck under the window. In that position, Ikuta continued talking to the girl beside him.

「… This is a good chance, so let's use your position as a newcomer to this Regiment, before they become guarded against you. Go into the kitchen with the excuse of touring around or something, draw Grandma Mari's attention for a while, and I will use that chance to steal the ingredients.」

「A misdirection, huh. I understand the plan. However… what is the contingency plan if we fail?」

「If that happens, I will convince Grandma Mari that I'm the mastermind, and I just dragged you along forcibly. She will probably let you off… Probably.」

Ikuta promised without any confidence, but the vermillion haired girl shook her head quietly.

「That's the procedure for surrender or after being taken prisoner. What I want to ask is, if the plan didn't work out, what should I do to support you?」

The girl stared straight at her to correct his misunderstanding. The boy looked at her blankly:

「... This is the first time someone asked me that.」

「The decision of abandoning one's comrade is a failure, that's what my father taught me.」

Yatorishino told him without hesitation. The boy accepted the girl's determination, and nodded with a serious face:

「Yes, sorry, you are right... But what should we do? If I get detected, that would be the end and there will be nothing to support. But we have to consider the situation where a few ingredients isn't extracted successfully.」

「In such a situation, I will extract the rest of the ingredients. You will then leave the enemy's patrol zone as quickly as possible.」

「What's a patrol zone?」

「That means the area where the enemy roams... For this case, that will be Grandma Mari. Go to a place where she can't see you. Let's first decide on a place to gather after the mission. I'm not familiar with the surrounding terrain, so it will be better for you to decide on the place.」

「Yes, I understand. That building all the way to the east— let's meet up behind that house.」

Ikuta pointed at the house marked as their rendezvous point, and showed a worried expression:

「... But, will that really be fine? If you want to extract the ingredients I couldn't get, then you have to draw Grandma Mari's

attention without making her wary, and go into the kitchen without bringing in a bag. That will be like announcing that you want to steal food. Going in empty handed will be the best, but then…」

Hmm～ the boy looked at Yatorishino's clothes and tilted his head. Her shirt only reached the top of her belly button, and close fitting shorts. Her clothes were suitable for moving outdoors, but couldn't hide any thing on her. It was clearly not suited for a thieving operation.

Leaving the cross armed and moaning Ikuta aside, the vermillion haired girl surveyed the area and said:

「— Are there any stables around here?」

「Stables? There's a big one over there. This is a base after all.」

「Will there be more people frequenting the area around that building later?」

「Yes… This is the back of the kitchen, and opposite of the dining hall. There is still some time before breakfast, so I don't think anyone will pass by soon.」

After confirming these necessary information, the girl jumped nimbly off the crate:

「Let's borrow some straws from the stables. As much as possible.
」

「—Hmm? What are you doing here?」

「Good morning. I'm Yatorishino Igsem who had the honor of visiting this base for an exchange study, I just arrived yesterday.」

The hoarse voice of the old lady and the clear voice of the girl reverberated inside the warm room— After the preparation at the stables was done, Yatorishino entered the kitchen as planned, and boldly faced the Tyrant of the kitchen, Grandma Mari.

「Oh, so you are the the guest I have been hearing about. Old Anarai was so excited yesterday… What brings you to the kitchen?」

「I want to observe the cooking process. I won't get in your way, can you accept this?」

「Hmm? You want to watch me cook? What a strange child.」

She was puzzled by the visit of this guest, but Grandma Mari didn't really mind her presence here, and cut the chicken with practiced movements. After confirming that her attention was on her task at hand, Ikuta sneaked in through the kitchen entrance. The operation started.

「The kitchen isn't that interesting. Those hungry soldiers will be here soon, so I will just make a huge amount of good tasting food for them swiftly. You can watch that if you want to, however—」

Grandma Mari chopped off the chicken's head with a thump. As she lifts the thick kitchen knife gleaming with blood and fats, the Tyrant of the kitchen warned quietly:

「— No stealing food.」

The old lady was as intimidating as a guard of hell, which made Yatorishino nodded timidly. She peeked behind her, and saw that Ikuta who infiltrated the kitchen had started his work. She started providing support.

「Is today's breakfast chicken?」

「It don't look like pork or fish, right? But these are for the NCOs. As for the privates, their food is in that pot there. If you promise you won't steal a bite, you can open the lid and take a look.」

While Yatorishino distracted Grandma Mari, Ikuta moved around the kitchen agilely, collecting the required ingredients one by one. As she watched him from the corner of her eyes, the vermillion haired girl look inside the simmering pot.

「It's stew. There seemed to be many things added in.」

「I even added in offals. It might not look like much, but this dish taste great.」

Grandma Mari explained with a smile, continuing to work while she spoke:

「The secret is the fresh chicken offals, and the use of spice. It's not just dumping everything into the pot, it needs to be fried with oil first.」

She said as she piled the diced chicken back on the chopping board.

「The taste will be too strong if I just did that. That's where the vegetables comes in. I will fry the onions thoroughly… oh, the salt has ran out.」

Grandma Mari stopped her seasoning, and looked inside the small salt bottle. In that instant, Ikuta sense the danger from her words and hid under the cooking platform. Right after that, the Tyrant of the kitchen turned around slowly.

「I forgot to refill it. The spare salt is…」

「I will get it. Is it in the cabinet in front?」

If Grandma Mari move around the kitchen, she would detect Ikuta. To make her stay in this spot, the vermillion haired girl offered her help.

「Yes, right, it's right there. You see any bags labelled 『salt』?」

「Salt… yes, is this it?」

Yatorishino walked to the other side of the kitchen and took out the bag of salt from a corner of the cabinet. On her way back, Ikuta showed her a thumbs up for her timely save.

「Thank you. You move so quickly, and it feels so refreshing to watch!」

Grandma Mari thanked her as she took the bag and poured salt into the small shaker. She then said as if she remembered something:

「Oh right, there is another kid around your age in this base, a naughty kid named Ikuta. Have you met him?」

「That is General Sankrei's son. I saw him when I met the General yesterday.」

「That's right, that boy. Instead of swift, his movements is closer to being rushed. He will create mischief if I'm not careful.」

The old lady snorted and then rubbed the salt in her hands into the kitchen meat.

「He is just a boy, but he is quicker to improvise than an adult, that's why he is so naughty. He got that from his father. You be careful, don't be careless and fall for his tricks.」

Yatorishino wasn't sure how to respond, and the pot of stew beside her started boiling out of the pot.

「Ara! The fire in the stove is too hot, I have to take out some of the firewood.」

Grandma Mari bend over and stuck a tongs into the stove. While she was busy tending to the fire, Ikuta wanted to continue gathering ingredients, but his plan fell through. A soldier barged into the kitchen:

「Grandma Mari, we have finished plucking the feathers and peeling the vegetables!」

「That took too much time! Come in and help!」

Yes yes yes～ the soldier with ingredients in his arms walked in. He was the soldier on kitchen duty doing simple tasks in another room. With the place getting crowded, it was difficult to continue playing hide and seek, so Ikuta withdrew from the kitchen.

「……」

The vermillion haired girl didn't missed the boy pointing at his previous hiding spot. She moved over there inconspicuously, and found a note he left behind. Yatorishino looked at it, and saw that the boy had used his fingernails to marked the ingredients he had taken.

Confirming that there were still three ingredients left, Yatorishino's eyes turned as sharp as a hawk.

「That is too slow, did you leave all your chores to your partner?」

First was the onions. The girl moved casually to the ingredients, picked up an onion and tossed it out the window. She then tossed two more out in the same way.

「No way, it's just that the kitchen knife had gotten blunt. I had to sharpen it.」

Next was dried mango. It would take some effort to locate that ingredient, but she noticed that the cabinet where she found the salt also contained dried fruits. She quickly found the sliced orange fruit inside, but was hesitant about tossing the thin slices. After considering it for a few seconds, Yatorishino laid a few slices together and tossed the entire lump out the window.

「Is that so? Then take care of all the blunt kitchen knife before noon.」

The last item was a pumpkin. She found it under the lowest cabinet in no time, but it was too big. Even the smallest one was the size of a child's head, and was heavy too.

However, the vermillion haired girl didn't hesitate, and acted swiftly when Grandma Mari and the soldier had their backs turned. She picked up the pumpkin in her right hand, and spun around twice before throwing it with the same technique of throwing a discus.

Pomf! A dull sound came from outside. 「Hmm?」 The two other people turned their heads when they heard that noise, and Yatorishino was already watching their cooking utensils nonchalantly. All the ingredients had been retrieved, she just need to withdraw now. The girl walked towards Grandma Mari and said:

「Watching you cook has been a valuable experience. The kitchen is getting a little crowded, so I should take my leave.」

「Oh, I'm glad it's helpful. You are welcome to visit again.」

When she saw the kind smile of the old lady who was hard to please, guilt stabbed at Yatorishino's heart. On the other hand, completing this 「mission」 like a thief gave the girl an incredible sense of exhilaration.

「……?」

Puzzled by this emotional state she had never experienced before, Yatorishino left the kitchen, unsure of what to make of this feeling.

After walking out of the front door, she went around to the back of the building. Some distance away from the window was a thick layer of straws, but there wasn't anything on it. Seeing that the boy had collected the ingredients, Yatorishino jogged towards the rendezvous point.

「Seems like everything turned out well.」

She found the boy at the building that looked like a warehouse, and said to him as she slowed her pace. Ikuta looked at her with an impressed face:

「That's right… but you are incredible～」

The boy said as he looked at the sack full of ingredients by his feet.

「All of them fell precisely on the straws. You tossed all of them while evading Grandma Mari's gaze, correct?」

「It's not too difficult. You have taken out all the softer ingredients.」

「No, I can't do the same thing. First, I might hit the window sill. Even if I didn't, I can't aim for the straws. Because the window is too high for me to see the other side.」

「By knowing the weight and shape of the ingredients, I can adjust the force to throw it in a specific arc. I had confirmed the distance from the outside, so all that's left is simple ballistics calculation.」

The girl wasn't aware that her tone had a hint of pride. Ikuta crossed his arms a little anxiously:

「… Ughh. I seem to have gotten an amazing companion.」

After finishing a few more similar 「missions」, when the sun rose high up into the sky, the two of them walked towards a house in the center of the base.

「This is my home.」

Ikuta stood before the entrance and pointed at the house. Yatorishino tilted her head puzzledly. This was a house built with timber and bricks, and although it was sturdily built, aside from being in the center of the base, it was just residential mansion that could be found anywhere.

「… Can I go in?」

「I want to counter that with, why not?— Mom, I'm home!」

The youth opened the door to his house energetically and announced his return. A gentle voice welcomed him from inside:

「Ikuta, welcome, back— Hmm?」

When she saw that lady, Yatorishino felt too moved to speak.

The lady had long, black and lustrous hair, eyes that could be described as agate, and her skin was incredibly white and supple in contrast. She wore a blouse that seemed exotic, with the thin and smooth material wrapping tightly around her body. Her limbs looked elegant and slender, and just the sight of her round nails were enough to mesmerize anyone.

No matter how young she was, this lady must be in her thirties, but her age didn't seem to be showing at all. When she thought about that, the girl corrected herself. Even her astonishing beauty was just superficial. The essence of her beauty lies with her character, and has nothing to do with age.

After a long silence, the girl realized her mistake, and quickly saluted:

「I-I'm Yatorishino Igsem. As per the instructions of General Sankrei, I am acting together with his son.」

「— Is that so. I'm Yuka, Ikuta's mother… Thank you for, playing with my son.」

Yuka raised the corners of her lips in a gentle smile, and saluted to humour the girl. Just this action was enough to show her gentle personality, and Yatorishino's heart was filled with warmth.

「We brought back all sorts of ingredients as requested by Dad. Luckily, Yatori is with me, these things are heavy.」

Ikuta said as he took out the ingredients from the sack and placed them on the table. Yuka picked them up happily.

「There are, so much food…」

「Cook a bit more lunch today. Yatori and I had been running around since morning, we are famished.」

「No, allow me to respectfully decline. I can't intrude…」

When Yatorishino answered on reflex, the boy turned to her in sincere surprise:

「Huh? You are not eating? Why, how is that possible? It's my Mom's cookings you know? It's the most delicious food in the world. 」

Ikuta used his entire body to stress how foolish that decision was, while his mother lowered her head sadly:

「Yatori, won't eat…?」

「… No, I would love too.」

No one could possibly refuse this after seeing Yuka pleading with moist eyes. When the vermillion haired girl nodded in resignation, Yuka beamed with joy:

「I will, start cooking… Before I’m done, go play with Ikuta.」

With that, she jogged back to the kitchen. Seeing that things had been decided, Ikuta took out a chess board from the living room cabinet and placed it before Yatorishino:

「Can you play chess?」

「Yes, I learned it at home. I heard this is a leisure pass time for officers.」

「Let’s play a match then. Are you fine with no handicaps? I want to have a fair match with you.」

The girl had no objections, and after lining up the pieces, the tossed the coin to decide who goes first.

「Alright, I will make the first move— Here.」

「— Sorry for the wait, the food, is ready… Hmm?」

About an hour later, Yuka finished cooking lunch and came over to call for the two children. However, Ikuta and Yatorishino were facing each other with a chessboard between them, lost in deep thought.

—Send out 6–3 windgunners, 6–7 fire troopers, and linked them up on the right wing after the battle… No, I need one more move to destroy the enemy… Then I should send 3–8 medics to stall them… But in this case, if I move these pieces in concert—

— Ignore the surprise attack by 8–2 in the frontlines… No, the 5–5 fire troopers are in the way… I don’t have enough pieces for attack… How about lifting the defences? But I have to consider the possibility of an attack by the enemy from 6–3…

Their thoughts seemed to be audible in the silence. Yuka was hesitant to call out to the children who were so engrossed. But she couldn’t bear letting the food she cooked go cold, so she made up her mind and spoke:

「Children, lunch, is ready… Okay?」

「……」　「……」

The children didn't even look her way, lest give her a response. After being ignored after calling out four times, the lady's shoulders started quivering a little:

「… Lunch, is ready…」

When Yuka raised her voice a little further with tears in her eyes, the two of them were pulled back to reality from their chess game.

「Huh…? S-Sorry Mom, I was too focused on analyzing the board…! I will be right there, so don't cry!」

「M-My apologies! I will be right there.」

They apologized and took their seats at the dining table hurriedly. At this moment, another person entered the house. It was Bada Sankrei.

「Phew～ I sneaked away successfully today too. I'm home～」

「Welcome home, Bada. I just, finished cooking lunch.」

「Ah～I'm starving— Oh, you came too, Yatorishino-chan. Son, are you done with the missions today?」

「I did, but it was getting dangerous. This is Yatori's first mission, so make it simpler, Dad you dummy.」

This was probably how he usually acted with his Father, so Ikuta wasn't reserved at all. Bada shrugged:

「It will be boring for her if it is too simple— Ah, there's a chess board on the table, did you play?」

「We are taking a break for lunch, we stopped at the 122nd move.」

「Let's see… Oh～ this is incredible, it's a tough fight. Looks like there is still some ways to go.」

Bada said with an impressed tone, then sat beside his wife. With all four of them present, they started digging in, but the chopsticks

confused Yatorishino. Yuka stood up in a hurry when she realized that.

「Sorry, Yatori. Please use, this fork.」

The vermillion haired girl gratefully accepted this familiar cutlery, but returned her gaze back to the chopsticks.

「Do all of you… eat with these two sticks?」

「You have to hold it between your fingers, look, like this. It's surprisingly convenient once you get used to it.」

Ikuta opened and closed the chopsticks, demonstrating its use to her. This unknown culture made Yatorishino open her eyes wide. She looked at the dishes on the table, and found them exotic too. Several small bowls were placed before each person, and the main food wasn't bread, but congee served on a plate instead.

After brooding over it for a while, she decided to try the soup first. When the amber soup flowed into her mouth, the faint taste of fresh seafood spread slowly in her mouth.

「… This…」

「How do you, find the soup? It might be, a little bland.」

「No… It taste great. You didn't add any spices, but it has a complex flavor… Is this fish soup?」

When she heard that feedback, Yuka clapped her hands gleefully:

「… I'm really glad, Yatori, can tell. It's your first time drinking, and you know it is dried fish stock, wonderful.」

「Stock…? What is dried fish?」

「Fish, that has been dried. It can be preserved, but if boiled, the taste will be brought out. That's stock… and this is soup made from it.」

Yuka got up and went to the kitchen to get the dried fish. She brought out a sack filled with small dried fish. Yatorishino took out one, and observed it intriguely.

「I'm amazed that you noticed after one sip～Yatori-chan. I couldn't tell at all.」

「… That's right, I remember when I first cooked, Bada's reaction. After one sip, Bada said—『You forgot to add salt to the soup』.」

「Dad has a dull tongue. If I give him soap and tell him it is cheese, he will probably eat it.」

「That's my line, son. If it is Yuka's cooking, you will eat it even if it's soap.」

「Of course I would. I will eat no matter how much of Mom's cooking there is.」

「Yatori-chan, Yatori-chan, isn't a boy with a Oedipus Complex disgusting?」

Bada muttered softly to the girl sitting diagonally across him. Amused by their interaction, Yatorishino asked intriguely while the atmosphere was laid back and harmonious:

「Do General Sankrei and your family live together here?」

「Yes, I don't like being transferred repeatedly, and leave my family behind. Our regiment is an All Territories Stronghold, and had to deploy to any parts of the Empire as needed. So I thought, I might as well bring my wife and son with me. In the end, I started living a life like this.」

「Since I'm around, Mom will be fine, so don't worry and go anywhere you like, Dad. Don't keep sending Uncle Saba and Uncle Rikan all over the country.」

「You don't understand, son. The boss has to house sit in the main base. If not, Saba and Hazaf won't have a place to return to. And to be honest, you will feel lonely if Dad isn't around, right? Hmm?」

Father and son teased each other as the mother watched happily from the side. Basking in the warm atmosphere, Yatorishino felt at peace.

「After lunch… Let's make pumpkin paste cake together. Both of you, took a lot, of ingredients, we need to return the favor to Mariban.」

Yuka said slowly, and Yatorishino nodded with a smile. Not only was she beautiful, this lady had an air about her that even those meeting her for the first time would grow fond of her.

I'm glad that I came for the exchange study, the girl thought as she drank the soup—

Her blissful dream stopped here. Yatori woke up in the dim tent, far from being comfortable at all.

「Lieutenant Colonel Yatorishino, a report! General Yorunzaf's unit has returned!」

The soldier's voice echoed through the area. She immediately got up from bed and put on her shirt. After keeping her partner fire sprite Shia into her pouch, she walked out of the tent.

When they saw Yatori, the soldiers in the field camp stood up and saluted. She responded with a smile, and observed her subordinates calmly. They might be showing a firm attitude to the commander, but the consecutive marches definitely drained their stamina. With the end of the coup nowhere in sight, she had to be cautious in her deployment of forces.

After raising through the ranks, Yatori met the familiar old one armed general. Honorary General Yorunzaf Igsem was standing before her, with a medic bandaging his right hand.

「Sorry, I messed up.」

The old general said with a bitter face, and raised his injured arm:

「I fell for the trick set by a young chap from the Remeon house, and was repelled from the frontlines. The Emperor might have fallen into the hands of the Rising Sun people. It is embarrassing to say this, but the cavalry I took with me got almost wiped out.

「I see… The important thing is that you survived. Can you tell me the details?」

Yorunzaf started briefing Yatori as per her request. The vermillion haired girl listened seriously to the three sides battle that happened in the southern part of the Dafuma Province── and the information regarding the whereabouts of the Emperor.

「… Assuming His Majesty is really in that quarantined treatment facilities, we should assume that the Rising Sun Regiment found him. However, the Jewel Voice Broadcast announcing the winner had not been sent.」

「It might be possible that they didn't find anything, but that means things didn't progress at all. However, that fox might have made things more complicated at the last crucial moment. For example, by holding the Emperor hostage and hiding in a hole.」

「There is a need to confirm this. We can send well rested soldiers to recon…」

「Never mind, that puny village must be completely surrounded now. Attempting to infiltrate will just result in them being detected and taken prisoner. Order the scouts to observe from a distance.」

「I feel the same. But then── the only way to learn more is for us to make a trip there.」

Yatori said with determination. Seeing that the old general had no objections, she switched topics:

「I have two things to report. A few days ago, Our unit engaged a Remeon faction unit led by Lieutenant Colonel Lucika Krukk, and

defeated them. We managed to secure the First Prince who was with them.」

「Oh～ so we got him back? Well done. The Igsem faction that supports the establishment had finally gotten out of the state of not having any royals with us.」

「Yes. The second thing— the Remeon faction's search team had turned sluggish because their commander-in-chief, Lieutenant Colonel Krukk died in battle. I sent my men to scout them, and there appears to be another reason for their chaos. Someone had sold them out from the inside.」

「Betrayal? Those guys who staged a coup with such determination is fighting amongst themselves now, what a riot… It's nothing special, but it feels a little suspicious.」

Yorunzaf frowned. This might be great news for them, but instead of being happy, he felt more baffled by this. Yatori thought the same way, and shifted her gaze to the south.

「In any case, we have to go south. The long break will end in an hour, and we will set off. What should we do about your unit? If you want to reorganize them, then I will make the transfer.」

When he heard her question, the one armed old general snorted and averted her face:

「I want to do that, but with my lone arm in such a miserable state, I can't command in the frontlines. Forget about the reorg, just take the rest of my cavalry.」

「Understood, I will do that— do you have any opinions on our future plans?」

「I only have one thing in mind— assume overall command in my stead, Yatorishino. I can't wield a sword or ride a horse, and couldn't raise the troop's morale by waving a flag. You just got the Prince

back, so this is a good chance. The defeated general is retiring now, so I will hand things over here.」

Yorunzaf said with a sigh. Yatori opened her eyes wide for a moment, and after realizing that he was serious, she straightened her back and nodded:

「… Yes Sir. I'm shocked. I never thought Grand uncle will say something like that.」

「Despite how I look, I'm still a little depressed… I have lost many battles before, but this is the first time I encountered something like this. It felt as if I had gotten thirty years older.」

The old general grumbled humbly, in contrast with his usual confident demeanour. Seeing her Grand uncle looking more frail than usual, Yatori made up her mind and asked:

「Is Torway Remeon's unit strong?」

「Yes. Thanks to them, I failed to die.」

He had a begrudged tone. Yatori felt conflicted, and Yorunzaf seemed to realized that and changed the topic:

「You killed Lucika Krukk, I remember she was responsible for the education of the Remeon house. She should have deep relations with that kid. He might become more violent when she learns of her death. Be careful if you have to fight him.」

「…… Yes.」

「That's all I want to say. You can do the formal change of command later, leave the troops to Megu, you get some rest before moving out. Sorry for waking you.」

After showing his concern to Yatori, Yorunzaf turned and left. She saluted and watched the back of the old general walking away, then looked up at the downcast sky… it hasn't change since a few days ago, with no signs of any crepuscular rays at all.

※

In the south of the Dafuma Province where the search team of the three units had congregated. At a quiet corner of the forest, where a secluded village lies.

In the deepest level of the village that lies in darkness, Ikuta and Princess Chamille was facing the worst minister in the history of the Empire.

「You actually pulled this stupid plan off.」

The youth said with a shrug. The fox in front of him rolled his eyes:

「— Ara, what are you talking about?」

Trisnai pretended to be retarded, and Ikuta continued calmly:

「… The Igsem, Remeon faction and our Rising Sun Regiment. The Imperial Army had split into three sides and clashed in their search for the Emperor. Thinking back, doesn't the circumstances leading to this situation stink of a guided intervention?

First of all, the one who issued the edict to take back the Hiored Ore Mines— is you, Trisnai. As a result, we started another war before the Empire can recover from the Northern unrest. With the unit from the former Eastern Stronghold as the core, an army was put together, and our 『Knight Corp』 were sent together to the battlefield… Just doing that was annoying enough.」

The youth stopped for a moment, then fidget his arm that wasn't holding the Princess' hand, trying to relax his tensed muscles.

「From the perspective of a high ranking officer, the decision to raise morale with our presence made sense. We were given the title of 『Imperial Knights』 for that purpose. It wasn't our intention, but our performance in the northern territory also increased our fame. This was the best way to spur the rank and file.

But what if we only consider the decisions made by Field Marshal Igsem and General Remeon?— From that angle, there are many things that didn't make sense. First of all, the Field Marshal won't send the Princess to the frontlines. He will definitely avoid sending a royal into danger, and at best, will arrange for her to be back end support. Or rather, for personnel like us that does more good in a nominal role than actual combat effectiveness, this would be the norm.

Next is General Remeon. Since Torway is with us, his decision appears even more strange. Normally, he will recall his son before staging the coup. As the leader of his faction, he will want as many comrades as possible, even more so since he is a parent.」

Ikuta felt his mind churning with his words and analysis. He had to go at his own pace, and take the initiative in the conversation with his glib of tongue.

「With that in mind, it was clear to us that the Hiored Ore Mines campaign army wasn't arranged by Field Marshal Igsem and General Remeon. So why were they forced to make these decisions against their wishes? It is easier to explain by putting the question another way— Who has the authority to override the decisions of the two head honchos of the Imperial Army?」

After listing everything that seems wrong, Ikuta asked his opponent this question.

「There is only one answer, the Emperor. Or the fox who is pulling the strings from behind— Hey, Trisnai. In your edict to take back the Hiored Ore Mines, you included the 『Knight Corp』 and Princess in very direct and unequivocal terms, right?」

Even after the youth pointed that out, the Chancellor's smile remained unchanged. He rubbed his palms together and said:

「What good will doing that do for me?」

「Since the way you weigh things aren't normal, there is no point in debating whether it benefits you. I'm just pointing out how that edict created this laughable situation.」

Ikuta cut off his opponent quickly, and continued:

「You are the one who ordered the retaking of the Hiored Ore Mines. Shortly after the campaign started, General Remeon staged his coup. The Igsem faction's forces was diminished because of the campaign, so he judged that this was a good chance— falling right into your trap.」

The youth delved into the truth, and his blade of analysis gradually unveiled the entirety of Trisnai's plan.

「The one who wanted the campaign, and gave the order. Given how elusive you were after the coup, it was clear that you expected the coup to happen. It was clear at this juncture— General Remeon's coup is instigated by you.」

Ikuta reached his first conclusion from his deductions. Seeing his opponent didn't react as he expected, he started going for his second point:

「… And that isn't all.

Thinking back, the decision to hand us over to the Navy was probably the best arrangement Field Marshal Igsem could make without going against the edict. If your instructions was 『commit the Knight Corp to the very fore of the frontlines』, then we will have to travel by land and take part in battles. But if we take the sea route, we will at least be treated as 『guests』 during our journey there, which will keep us away from harm.」

The youth snorted, and put his palm on his forehead:

「Sigh, we were being nosy ourselves too, but that arrangement worked against us instead… In any case, we reached the mines safely. With the encirclement of the enemy completed, we weren't

given any dangerous tasks. Compared to the Northern unrest, this was much better. As I was thinking about that and probing the pretty white boy from Kioka… We learned about the news of the coup.」

His tone sounded bitter, and the fox deepened his smile:

「If I knew a coup might happen, I would have made some preparations. But that is still limited to what I can do, so in the great scheme of things, I had to be more conservative— but when it actually did happen, the situation was too good to be true. I had the Third Princess to back me up, and the commander of the campaign force was an old acquaintance, Major General Saba, and his subordinates were all officers associated to the 『Rising Sun Regiment』. As if the situation was begging me to create my own faction.

I'm woefully lacking in religious faith, and couldn't accept that all these was pure coincidence.」

Ikuta stared at the culprit before him with obvious hostility:

「I can say for certain that like General Remeon's coup, the revival of the 『Rising Sun Regiment』 was something you planned and hope for— you manipulated me, fox.」

With a burning rage in his abdomen, the dark haired youth stated his second conclusion. A short while later, Trisnai stopped rubbing his palms and started clapping:

「Fu- Fufufufu…! Well done, that' more like it…!」

His quiet laughter echoed in the darkness. The fox's mask-like smile turned rosy, which made him even creepier. The youth could feel Princess Chamille's right hand trembling. Ikuta gripped tightly as if he was dispelling her fear, then said:

「… Ever since we saw each other during Lieutenant General Safida's court martial, I thought you might see through my real identity. I tried to conceal it by using Major Sazarf as a front, but my

position was still prominent, and I couldn't hide entirely behind him.
」

「That's right, that's right— I could smell it after that Major made his proposal for the aftermath of the war. The nostalgic smell of that man. I will never miss that… And now, you are giving out the exact same scent.」

「Maybe I should wear some cologne? Unfortunately, I have no intentions of dressing up for you at all. I'm the one who wants to pinch my nose.」

The youth said as he pinched his nose for real. Even in the face of that reaction, Trisnai just smiled at him happily. This feels like a conversation with some sort of monster or devil— even though that isn't scientific, Ikuta couldn't help thinking.

「In any case… The Imperial Army is now in the dire state of being divided into three factions as you wanted. With the Emperor missing, back then, no one knew how things would go. The chances of us reaching first is not high at all. So don't even try to claim that you expected this to happen.」

When Ikuta pointed that out, Trisnai nodded relaxly:

「That's right, I couldn't tell that far. I was merely hoping. Hoping while I stirred the pot and brew war. If it is you, there might be a chance. If it was the son of Bada Sankrei— that's how it is.」

When he said the name of the late hero, Trisnai's face showed a strange obsession. Ikuta felt too creeped out to analyze that emotion, and spoke as if he was chasing away a chill:

「This is the result of your irresponsible cooking. Are you happy to see us struggling painfully in the stew?」

「Fufufu…! Indeed, the ingredients are fresher and stronger than I imagined, it will be troubling if they jumped out of the pot. I was wondering if I should increase the intensity of the fire.」

They then stopped speaking and just glared at each other. Seeing their back and forth had ceased, Princess Chamille mustered her courage and interjected:

「… You are still a first rate clown. There is no point behind your act now. Stop hiding things and state your intentions. What do you want?」

In response to her question, Trisnai's narrow eyes turned to the Princess, as if he was elated at finding a new prey:

「Fufu…? Instead of asking me, shouldn't you ask yourself? Third Princess Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik.」

「… What do you mean?」

「Stop your facade. I mean that this situation is exactly what you are yearning for. You understand too, right? All the necessary conditions are in place.」

Trisnai said with his arms open. That obvious temptation made Princess Chamille frown:

「… After being forced to the brink, you are trying to get on my good side now? I thought I already know about your corrupted nature, but you are really frivolous— Dear uncle.」

When he heard that term, Ikuta glanced at the Princess. The girl was still glaring at Trisnai and explained calmly:

「This rumor is often brought up in the palace… Trisnai Izanma was born to a mid class noble house, but if you check his history, his mother gave birth to him in her fifties. I won't say that is impossible— but according to the testimony from back them, his mother in name, Hatarifa Izanma, didn't show any signs of pregnancy.」

The fox listened quietly to the Princess. Even when the topic touched on the question of his birth, he didn't waver at all.

「There are also questions on how he got so close to the Emperor. He didn't achieve anything outstanding as a bureaucrat, but Trisnai and the reigning Emperor had known each other even before he became Chancellor. It couldn't be explained away with bribes. The Izanma house's financial prowess is top of the mid tier at best, and there are plenty of houses richer than them.」

Princess Chamille stopped here for a moment, casting her gaze to Trisnai's side— where the bandaged Emperor was lying.

「… Before he was coronated, the Emperor was just one of numerous Princes. Since he couldn't completely trust anyone around him, that person laying over there— the young Arshankrut Kitra Katjvanmaninik was probably very lonely. It was a common problem for all royals, as finding a sincere friend was rare. Commoners can rely on their family, but for royals can't relax around their siblings. Life in the palace is a fight for the right of succession— where brothers often kill each other.」

The girl spoke from her own experience. She knew better than anyone how twisted the environment of a royal was.

「In this confined environment, his solitude must be growing stronger with time. As his suspicion grew wider and wider, the urge to have someone who he could relate to by his side will grow stronger. And then— what if such an exception appears? Someone with the same blood, but is just a lowly bureaucrat without any backing, and fated to be excluded from the line of succession. If he met someone like that, wouldn't it be only natural to want that person to stay by his side?」

Solitude also presented an opening. After digesting what she just said, Ikuta asked quietly:

「… So that exception inherited the bloodline of the Eternal Sprite Tree, but isn't a royal?」

「The Emperor has to be perfect. His bloodline must be untainted. A contradiction that arises from the delusion of nobility. Solork, you should be able to guess what will happen to a royal that has an obvious flaw at birth.」

After saying that coldly, the Princess pointed at the person before them:

「They will be wiped from existence. Just like him.」

Trisnai squinted his eyes. He seemed really happy, like a father watching the growth of his child.

「Your intellect is proof that you have inherited the royal bloodline. Chamille the wise— my cute niece.」

As he was being watched, the fox pulled up his kiaki shirt and undershirt, revealing his body, making the youth and the Princess gasp. His bones were deformed. Several ribs on his chest were twisted or missing, and the middle of his chest was obviously sunken in.

The most serious of all was his heart. His heart that should be protected deep within his ribs could be seen through thumping through a thin layer of flesh and skin.

「I had no intention of hiding this from the start. This is the secret that the royals is adamant on hiding, but isn't a weakness for me. I'm even happy that you acknowledge that we are related by blood.」

「Is inheriting this bloodline something to be happy about…? We can't understand each other after all.」

Ignoring the Princess' comment, Trisnai put down his clothes. His strange skeletal structure was completely conceal. In order to hide his silhouette, he seemed to have some sort of fillings in his clothes.

After seeing the truth, Princess Chamille sighed deeply:

「I can only make deductions about the past, but it has been proven now. He was the second son of the previous Emperor— and

the younger brother of the reigning Emperor… However, he can't be entered into the royal family registry.」

「So he can't revert back to being a royal?」

「There is no way. The royal family law states that all royals must meet with the Emperor's personal sprite within one month of their birth, and joins the royal family registry through this process. But Trisnai didn't have the chance, and unlike royals who had been removed from the royal family registry as punishment for scandals, he was never in the registry in the first place. He can't recover this right.」

Princess recited from her memory. Ikuta nodded and look at the fox:

「Which means… the highest position you can achieve is the Imperial Chancellor, Trisnai? If you can't accept this, then you will have to find another path towards building an Empire, but that's not your goal, right?」

The youth said half seriously, but evoked a big reaction. Trisnai furrowed his brow, and showed a sincere look of regret:

「What an impudent thing to say, Sankrei. Isn't truth obvious to everyone? Aside from the Eternal Sprite Tree, there are no other orthodox Empire in the world. All other nations are insignificant.」

When he heard Trisnai's passionate declaration, it was the youth's turn to frown:

「… You want to talk about the orthodox right of rule? After turning the Emperor into your puppet, and making a mess of this country by abusing your power?」

「It's regrettable that you think that. I'm telling the truth, no one loves the Empire more than me.」

「Hey, you can say what you want, but do it in a language I understand.」

Ikuta snorted, as if to show that he was out of ideas. Their conversation paused for a moment, and the fox turned to the Princess:

「Princess Chamille, you pointed me out as a royal that was wiped from existence— but do you know, you almost ended up the same way?」

An ominous light shone from his narrow eyes. The Princess backed away unconsciously, and asked:

「… What did you say?」

「It happened at Your Highness' birth. As the fourteenth child of the reigning Emperor, you were born as the Fifth Princess. As you know, two of your elder sisters died within three years, and you were elevated to the Third Princess. Don't you find it terrifying?」

「… I heard the struggle for the line of succession was very intense back then. Aside from paintings, I had never seen my sisters. However… I heard that the both of them died of unnatural death.」

「The elder one was strangled in her chambers. The younger died in terrible pain from poison in her food. During the same period, one of the Princes went missing. It was no exaggeration to say that all royals in the palace lived in fear of being murdered.」

「I can imagine that. I don't deny that I was on the same perilous path.」

「No, that's not what I meant. Your first crisis wasn't life in the palace, but even earlier— when you were just born.」

There was a gloom in Trisnai's voice. She knew she shouldn't listen, but the Princess still perked up her ears:

「Back then, the Emperor was sadden by the heated power struggle between his children. The fight for the right of succession was closely related to the backings of powerful nobles, and even the Emperor couldn't stop them. The Princes had already lost the heart

to heed their father's advice, and His Majesty felt annoyed at the sight of his own scions— as the mental state of the Emperor fell into this terrible state, you were born.」

Trisnai said with a sigh. Ikuta nodded at his pretentious actions. He witnessed countless drama throughout his years in the palace, including the birth of Princess Chamille.

「He didn't want more Princes or Princesses. Even with that thought, he didn't stop summoning women into his chambers every night, which was something His Majesty would do. Only when he was playing with his concubines, did he felt in absolute control. In other words, the Emperor was only after the pleasure of the flesh— and wasn't interested in the consequences of his action. No, he hated it.」

Realizing halfway that the contents would be horrible, Ikuta went around the Princess' back and covered her ears. Trisnai smiled at the sight of that, and increased his volume:

「That was why, when I reported news of your birth to His Majesty, he ordered angrily—」

The fox stuck out his tongue with his hands on his neck, and said with all the malicious feelings in his heart:

「『I don't want her. Strangle her and throw her away!』」

The impact went through the youth's palms and shook Princess Chamille's entire body. Before she could recover, Trisnai continued:

「His Majesty was serious when he said that. Normally, the Emperor's will wouldl be carried out before the baby was bathed for the first time— But since Your Highness is standing here, it is obvious that didn't happen. Hey, do you know why?」

Ikuta hugged the Princess' head tightly and shouted: 「Shut up!」. Treating that admonishment as a cheer, the fox continued talking:

「I was the one who persuaded His Majesty. I pleaded him to calm down, and accept the birth of the Princess— Do you understand? You are only standing here because I saved you!」

Hard to accept facts came one after another, as the Princess' turned blank from the horror.

「Cute Chamille, smart Chamille. That's not the only time I saved you. How else could a child survive in a hellish environment where even her own father detest her? To spare you from being harmed by your siblings, and not become a puppet of the nobles, I used all means available to me. Handing you to Kioka was one such methods. I bestowed you value as a political hostage, and kept you away from the succession war.」

Trisnai kept boasting his contributions as he looked at the Princess with passionate eyes. There was even something akin to love in his eyes.

「Do you understand now? I have no intention of currying favor with you. I don't have to do that to be your guardian, you must realize what I'm after and realize my wishes. That is only natural, since I have given you so much!」

Princess Chamille started quivering. Ikuta hugged her tightly, enraged beyond words:

「… Why do all of you… Want to curse this child?」

With the Princess in his arms, he turned towards the enemy and declared:

「Hey, fox, this might be a waste of time, but let me tell you some common sense— when a child before you is in danger, it is only expected for an adult to help her. Hence, adults shouldn't demand anything in return for offering their aid. You got that wrong right from the start and your argument can't hold any water— Also…」

It became harder for Ikuta to keep his emotions in check as he spoke. The thoughts of the unreasonable things tormenting the girl in his arms made him yell from the bottom of his arms:

「… Just keeping this child alive but watching idly as her soul gets ravished and broken, you have no rights to call yourself a guardian! 」



This roar reverberated within the dark room— at this moment, the Princess' quivering started to ease. The fox's words that attempted to corrupt her soul had been dispelled by a stronger warmth.

His smile disappeared for the first time as Trisnai glared at the two of them:

「— I see. So you are her guardian now, Ikuta Sankrei?」

「I know very well that I'm far from qualified to be a guardian, but I'm much better than you.」

「… Fufufu! Ara, I sure am hated.」

His clown-like attitude returned immediately, and the fox suddenly pressed his finger between his brows:

「… No, no. Chatting with you is too stimulating, I will forget the time if we continue. Before that, let's get back to the main topic.」

Ikuta turned tense. All that talk was just a prologue.

「By order of the reigning Emperor, Arshankrut Kitra Katjvanmaninik, I, Chancellor Trisnai Izanma declare that a royal conference will be held today. There is only one royal in attendance— The Third Princess Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik.」

Trisnai declared with mesmerized eyes, and prostrated himself respectfully.

「Congratulations, Princess Chamille. You are just one step away from the throne. After lying in wait for such a long time, your chance to realize your dream is just one step away.」

The chancellor said gleefully. Unwilling to let his opponent dictate the pace, the youth cut him off:

「Don't get ahead of yourself, fox. There are other royals aside from her, and there's no meaning in discussing about the succession here… As a preventive measure against the Emperor passing away suddenly, make the Princess the first in the line of succession, which should be enough as an insurance. There is no need for the Emperor

to abdicate, just appointing a regent to rule in his stead will be enough.」

Ikuta had no plans to let the girl in his arms carry the burden of the throne. If the Emperor suddenly died, she would have to take the throne, but she just had to hand the seat over to another royal when the situation has stabilized. He promised the vermillion haired girl to protect the heart of the Princess this way.

「If you understand, then do that quickly. You are acting on behalf of the Emperor, so you have the authority to change the right of succession, correct?」

「That's to be expected. Since Princess Chamille is the only royal who came here, I have no intention of giving the throne to anyone else. I had given them a fair chance, but they didn't prove their bloodline of the Eternal Sprite Tree. How unsightly, how foolish…! Such imperfections should naturally be expunged from the records! Their existence has to be erased!」

His shout was dripping with grudge and resentment, but that seething hate calmed down instantly. Trisnai turned to the Princess with all smiles.

「Hence, there is only one person qualified to lead the next generation. Princess Chamille— as the Imperial Chancellor, I'm prepared to bestow upon you the grandest title. In my opinion, taking the long route of a Regent is useless, but if that is your wish, then it shall be done. The result will be the same in either case.

You are just one step away from the peak of the mountain— to ascend to the greatest height, I have only one condition.」

His plastered on smile deepened. Unveiling the demonic nature behind his mask, Trisnai told them:

「Destroy the Igsem. Gather the Remeon forces with the authority of your edict, and ravage the false Imperial Army under the red hair

marshal. Wear the blood from that battle as your mantle, and ascend to the peak as the absolute ruler!」

「What—」

Princess Chamille stopped breathing, as if an icy hand had seized her heart. When the fox said 'destroy the Igsem', it sounded to her like— kill Yatori.

「You have gone too far, fox.」

The youth said in an ice cold voice, and gestured to the windgunners behind him to aim their muzzles at the corrupted bureaucrat.

「There is absolutely no reason to spare you. No need for talk, just die here.」

After saying that without any emotions, Ikuta held the Princess' head tightly with both arms. Not just her ears, he even covered her eyes, shielding her heart for unnecessary damage.

With the resolve to shoulder all responsibility, the youth was about to give the order— when it happened.

『— Assault against authorized personnel detected. Warning to intruders. The death of the authorized personnel will affect the AE series human assistance system. All programs related to the country unit 「Katjvarna Empire」 will then be set to default. 』

A sprite on the bed said. Was it the Emperor's partner sprite?

『If you execute this action, the upkeep cost of all humans in this country unit will increase by more than ten times. Given the legal, ethics and upkeep efficiency, the intruder is advised to ceased the assault. I repeat the warning to the intruder. The death of the authorized personnel will affect the AE series human assistance system—』

Ikuta felt something so ominous that all the hairs on his body stood on ends, and he shouted on reflex without waiting for his mind to process all that:

「— Put down your guns!」

The soldiers who were ready to squeeze the trigger put their rifles away quickly. With a chill down his back, the dark haired youth asked in a hoarse voice:

「... Trisnai, what is that?」

The chancellor didn't flinch despite his close brush with death, and gently place his hand on the edge of the bed:

「As you heard, that is the ultimatum the sprites is giving you. It included many foreign terms, but you get the gist of it, correct?」

「... Your death will have great adverse effect on all citizens of the Katjvarna Empire. Unless my ears have failed me, that is what it sounds like.」

「Impressive, you get it really quickly. Yes, you can interpret it as such. This is no exaggeration— if you kill me or do something to the similar effect, then this country will lose the blessing of the four great sprites forever.」

Trisnai answered with his arms spread. The chill he felt intensified, but Ikuta tried his best to stay calm and asked:

「What bull shit. Where did that nonsense come from?」

「Ra-Saia-Alderamin.」

The fox suddenly named a well known country, and started explaining:

「The nation you fought with in the Northern Territories. After that battle, they had stopped military maneuvers for now, cooperating with Kioka and lay in wait along the Grand Arfatra Mountains. That might be so— but if you think diplomatic relations with them had been completely cut off, then you are very wrong.」

The fox said sarcastically. Ikuta twitched the corners of his lips. There was no one in the Empire who could grasp the fox's actions in its entirety.

「You might have forgotten, but I'm the chancellor, chief of all bureaucrats. Politics is my battlefield. And that is why, when I have the chance to go on a punitive campaign, I won't permit the unsightly result of returning empty handedly.」

Trisnai said in a firm tone, then gently put his hand on his chest:

「What I won is this. The post of a archbishop— which is a title second only to the pope. Right now, I have the blessing of the four sprites and god. Do you understand what a heinous sin it is to point your guns at me!?」

Trisnai shouted menacingly. The youth shook his head, unfazed by his attitude:

「The sprites will abandon the Empire on your death just because you are an archbishop? — What horse crap. If high religious titles are so great, Aldera would have conquered the Empire long ago.」

「It is as you say, the title doesn't confer such authority in this country. That is only natural, since the Aldera church didn't state that. No one can order the Sprites to 『give up on humans』. Because helping humans with their lives had been their instinct throughout the times.」

「What you said contradict each other. So why will your death result in people losing the blessing of the Sprites?」

「The most happiness of the many— I used this reasoning to understand the authority of personal sprite. If the sprite is the Emperor's partner, it will have more special ability such as Jewel Voice Broadcast. But what is the limit of its power— no one can tell for certain. I found a research topic worth studying here. How much can a personal sprite influence other sprites?

Let me tell you the answer. For sprites from Empire, depending on the triggering condition, it is even possible to forcibly stop them completely. Do you understand? That is what it meant by losing the blessing of the Sprites.」

Even Ikuta couldn't answer immediately, and fell silent as he analyzed the content. During this time, the fox continued proudly:

「Right now, I'm the chancellor acting on behalf of the Emperor, harming me is detrimental to the Empire as a whole. My death will result in the death of many others— No matter what the truth might be, the personal sprite think so and set a punishment to stop you from killing me, which will lead to more humans living happily!」

「……!」

「In all of history, I'm probably the only individual whose death will result in such a heavy penalty. It took a lot of effort to convince the personal sprite, and the title of archbishop I worked so hard to get is also to increase my importance to this country. For the Empire's future, I can't die, and there is a need to set a serious punishment to deter others from killing me— it took me more than a month to convince the sprite of this logic.」

When he heard that, the youth finally understood what the Chancellor did:

「… You are using the contradiction in logic to guide the sprite's thinking…!」

「That's right. The principle is the same as the method in making Fire Sprites produce 『Dynamic Air』. As you know, the sprite's thinking is clumsy compared to us, but they can't just ignore the problem at hand, and will try to find a way through the conditions laid out by humans. Aren't they so tenacious and cute? Their self sacrificing attitude to ensure my safety made them even cuter.」

The Chancellor took the personal sprite from the bed and lift it high, and laughed mockingly:

「If you still want to kill me after hearing all that — then carry on. As you can see, it’s simple to stab me in the chest. But when you do so… You have to brace yourself for the death of all 20 million citizens in the Empire.」

Faced with his threat, Ikuta and Princess Chamille couldn’t help shivering. If they really lose the blessings of the four great sprites, the losses will be incalculable. Most of the Imperial citizens were dependent on the sprites in their lives.

People could only live safely in places with sparse rainfall, because water sprites guaranteed access to clean potable water. They could act after dusk because illuminate sprites provide them with light. They didn’t have to start a fire to cook as the fire sprites readily share their tinder. War between the Empire and Kioka was only possible because the wind sprite was willing to embed itself in guns. If all these were gone, the living standards of Imperial citizens would regress by centuries.

The problem wasn’t just on the practical level. The sprites were already deeply rooted in the lives of the people, and the position given to it by the Aldera church made them the mental support of the citizens. The Sprites disappearing would definitely cause major upheaval to Imperial society. As the country abandoned by god, the royals would lose their mandate to rule.

If that happens— their destruction would be inevitable.

「… We will restart the negotiations later.」

Seeing that the situation had taken a bad turn, Ikuta took Princess Chamille’s hand, then turned to leave. Trisnai’s stern voice came from behind:

「The royal conference has began. Do you think anyone will be permitted to leave this solemn meeting?」

The youth stopped momentarily, then glared at his opponent with a sideway glance.

「So what if you don't permit it? Are you going to strip the Princess of her succession rights for leaving midway? — That's impossible. I know that will go against your plans, that isn't a threat at all.」

His rebuttal left the fox speechless. Ikuta grunted and continued walking:

「If you can't spell out any other punishment on the spot, that means you don't have that many cards to play— just shut up and wait here. Don't need to rush, I will drag you out of this protective shell you are so proud of.」

He left the half underground building and returned to the surface, then headed to the camp at the edge of the village together with his comrades waiting for him. Everyone changed as per Haro's instruction, washed their hands, rinsed their mouths, then wiped their entire body with towels soaked in disinfectants.

After washing up, Ikuta gathered the members of the 「Knight Corp」 again. After everyone arrived in the officer's tent, the first thing he did was check on his comrades:

「Have everyone disinfected properly? Rinse your mouth and washed your hands?」

「Yes we did, Ik-kun.」 「You repeated that so many times.」

「Of course I did, I also cleaned Her Highness with extra care. Don't worry!」

When he heard their answer, Ikuta nodded with a smile. However, Matthew still look worried.

「… But will that be enough to prevent the contagious diseases? Just one person getting infected will cause a whole lot of trouble.」

「Most of the soldiers are standing by outside the village, and I ordered the troops who entered the village to clean themselves like we did. To prevent anyone from taking things lightly, they will do this

in pairs. And naturally, we won't approach or let the residents come near us, I also asked them not to go near vomit and excrements, or stand downwind from them. It is true that there is still some risk, but…」

Ikuta paused, then after hesitating for a moment, he said with a complicated expression:

「… I don't want anyone to let their guard down, so I had been reluctant to say this. Right now, this village probably don't have any patient with terrible contagious diseases. Haro, did you find any patients with such symptoms?」

Haro poured tea into cups that matched the number of people present, and shook her head:

「… I can't be certain without going near for a diagnosis, but from what I know, the residents wandering outside don't have any specially contagious diseases. And… if such a disease is rampant here, the village would be in an even more terrible state.」

「I-Is that so? But they don't look healthy…」

「But they have not contracted contagious diseases. If I have to say, they are ill with disease that others are afraid of catching.」

Ikuta said with a sigh, and a steaming tea cup was placed before him. After taking a sip, the youth continued:

「In the past fifty years, there had been no reports of major epidemics in the Dafuma Province. I checked with the Princess, so that can't be wrong. Sigh, speaking from common sense, if a province near the capital had an epidemic, it would be strange that there isn't any uproar.」

When he saw his comrades show relieved faces after learning that, Ikuta looked depressed:

「… What I'm going to talk about next isn't a cheerful topic. Although there won't be any epidemics, there still will be people

being sent to quarantined villages like this. Or rather, as long as the people around them feels that 『I don't want to catch that sickness』, that will be reason enough to quarantine the patient. In most cases, whether the disease is contagious or not isn't important.

It might not be contagious, but people who got them will be isolated— most had clearly visible symptoms. I'm sure all of you know some well known examples.」

The four of them turned quiet with heavy faces. Seeing their reaction, the dark haired youth nodded quietly:

「Anyway, places like this are usually a haven for citizens ostracized by their villages, and not a place for patients with contagious disease to wait for their end. The fact that this village can sustain itself for such a long time without being ravaged by contagious diseases is enough proof. People are banished here at a considerable rate and contagious disease… so the fox chose to hide here. There aren't dangerous patients here, and it's suitable to conceal himself.」

Ikuta said bitterly and shook his head lightly:

「Sorry, I got off track— the reach of catching contagious disease is low, but we must keep up with the mouth rinsing, hands washing and disinfection. Given the situation, just catching a cold will still be very troublesome.」

Seeing everyone nod, the dark haired youth changed the topic:

「It's about time to discuss the main issue, which is Trisnai Izanma and the Emperor.」

The youth explained the entire conversation he had in the dark basement, only leaving out the parts regarding Princess Chamille's past. The atmosphere grew tense:

「… What does this mean? So that chancellor is holding all the Sprites and citizens in the Empire hostage?」

Matthew said with a face of disbelief. Feeling the same way, Ikuta twitched his lips:

「If we take everything at face value, then you are right. But 90% of that is just a bluff.」

The youth concluded with firm conviction, and Haro opened her eyes wide:

「I-Is that true?」

「Of course. Forcibly stopping all the Sprites in the Empire— if he can really do that, he would have shown us a demonstration on a small scale, such as stopping my kusu. Just that example will make things much more convincing, but he just droned on and on. Something definitely don't add up.」

When he pointed out this suspicious point, Torway nodded in agreement:

「Yes, that felt unnatural to me too. Saying he can and proving he could are worlds apart. Since he didn't do so, then it is only logical to be dubious about his prowess.」

「That's right. In any case, his words are no different from yelling 『you will suffer divine retribution if you kill me!』 If he did that, I would have scoffed it off— but the problem is, unlike the dubious existence of god, the Sprites do exist before our eyes.」

The four aside from Princess Chamille looked at the Sprites on their laps.

「Their abilities are an enigma to us. We benefit greatly from their functions, but have no idea on the theory on how the Sprites work. The mechanism behind Kusu's light, Safi's wind and Miru water creation are all unknown. Even 『Anarai's box』 couldn't move beyond theories.」

Ikuta stated this fact with reverence, and caressed Kusu's head with his fingers:

「And for the Emperor's personal sprite, the mystery deepens. That sprite is obviously different from normal ones. Jewel Voice Broadcast, the royal registry, and the sharing of information regarding the reigning Emperor— these are all extraordinary abilities it actually possess.」

「In that case, we can't be sure if it possess the power to stop all sprites… That's what you are saying, right?」

The youth nodded and concurred with the Princess. Matthew crossed his arms and groaned:

「We know that 90% of his words are bluffs, but we only have circumstantial evidence to confirm that… Correct?」

「If we pressed on by assuming it's a bluff, the risk will be too great. Without Sprites, people won't be able to survive.」

Ikuta said with a bitter face. Haro bit her nails with a worried look:

「… What should we do? The chancellor said the condition for Her Highness to take on the role of Regent is to 『destroy the Igsem』, right? That is definitely impossible. Our goal is to mediate for the coup… And also, Yatori-san is…」

The atmosphere became even heavier. That worried Torway, who then said:

「Everyone, getting depressed won't help with anything, let's sort out the situation first.

The Emperor and chancellor are in our hands now. We plan to use this authority to end the coup peacefully, but Trisnai added an impossible condition at the last moment to mess things up. We want to dispose him, but he claimed that all the Sprites and citizens in the Empire are his hostage. We know that it is 90% a bluff, but we only have circumstantial evidence to refute him… That's how things stand.」

After hearing the youth summarize the situation, the dark haired youth nodded:

「Hmm, your description is right on point… I see, so you are finally willing to take the initiative to act as a mediator.」

「Ah… sorry, am I overstepping my bounds?」

「No, stupid, this is good. If you don't step up, then who will? Don't forget, after this coup ends, the Remeon house will take centerstage.」

Torway nodded firmly in response to Ikuta's word of warning. Their interaction spurred the competitive spirit of the pudgey youth, who lifted his hand up high:

「I-I have a proposal! Erm~... why don't we ignore Trisnai for now, and link up with the Remeons? This might seem like we are avoiding the issue, but it's fine to ignore him, right? Just getting hold of the Emperor will be enough to give us the edge when we negotiate with the other factions.」

When Matthew said that, Ikuta turned to him in surprise, which made him anxious:

「H-Huh…? Did I say something wrong?」

He thought about what he said, but the dark haired youth before him shook his head slowly:

「… You are absolutely right, my dear Matthew!」

After saying that monotonously, Ikuta tapped his head with a clenched fist:

「Oh no… it seems that I'm less calm than I thought. I'm only focused on taking care of that fox right now, and completely forgot the big picture.」

Everyone looked at the youth who realized that he was not in his best condition. Matthew said with empathy:

「You are tired. Since we set off from the Hiored Ore Mines, you have been hard at work as the ranking commander, right? The pressure behind each of your orders is much greater than before. It is only natural for a mere Lieutenant who gets thrust into the limelight to get burnt out.」

When he said it out, it sounded only natural. Haro agreed with this sentiment:

「… That's right. I think we are giving Ikutasan too much pressure. I know that the situation might be unpredictable— No, precisely because of that, why don't we have a rest?」

「I agree. Letting Ik-kun stay at his best condition is the quickest route to our goal. Have a good rest, Ik-kun. We will take care of things while you sleep.」

Torway promised with a firm tone, and patted his chest. The dark haired youth nodded with a wry smile:

「… I can't find any reasons to refuse. I understand, I will accept everyone's kind offer. I will rest for half a day now.」

「At least sleep for one day. You can't breath easy unless you slack several times more than others, right? … It's decided then, so hurry up and go.」

Chased away by Matthew, Ikuta obediently got up from his chair, and took the hand of Princess Chamille who was sitting beside him. She looked at the youth bafflingly:

「Ah—Solork?」

「You are coming too, of course. Both of us didn't sleep much, so don't say you are not tired.」

Ikuta pulled the Princess up, then started walking while holding her hand.

「Okay, I will turn my head that way. The luggage is over there, go on to bed after changing into your pyjamas.」

「Huh–?」

Princess Chamille was brought to another tent, and started looking around. She realized something a moment later. There was only one bed here.

「T-Together— we are sleeping together? You want me to sleep with you on the same bed?」

「You are three years too early to be so shaken. Enough, hurry up and change.」

「N-No, but…!」

「Ahh～ While we are talking, time is being wasted～ my precious vacation~ my irreplaceable break time～」

Urged by this slow sighing sound, the Princess alternate her gaze between her pyjamas and the bed several times. After a heated struggle, she gulped and gently touched the buttons on her clothes.

The sound of her clothes sounded exceptionally clear to the girl. She turned her head to check behind her several times, and took twice as long as usual to change into her pyjamas.

「… I-I'm done.」

「Then, ladies first.」

Ikuta turned back and pointed at the bed. The girl needed enormous courage to follow his instruction. After hesitating for a long time, Princess Chamille laid down cautiously near the edge of the bed.

「… I-Isn't this bed too small, f-for two?」

「I'm used to it. And since I'm sharing it with the Princess, I think it's too spacious.」

「Horrible! What you said is horrible in both layers! That's the most shameless and detestable words I can ever imagine!」

「Ah～ you are so noisy.」

The youth took off his shirt and hang it on the chair, then laid on the bed without any hesitation:

「I might reek of sweat a little, but bear with it. We can't afford the luxury of showers yet.」

「Don't bring that up! M-Me too… So, we don't have to sleep in the same bed…」

「Stop joking. After that thing happened, how can I leave you by yourself for an entire day?」

Ikuta said to her in a firm tone, and pulled her over. He pulled Princess Chamille who might fall off the bed if she turned in her sleep to the center of the bed, then gently stroked her blonde hair with his fingers. As the thumping of the Princess' heart almost reached its peak, the youth whispered into her ears:

「Go to sleep and forget all this. You don't need to hold on to anything. No matter what your past might be, it won't bound your future.」

「—」

「Good night, Princess. Try to have a sweet dream. I will keep watching you until you fall asleep.」

Tears appeared in the Princess' eyes. Her tense body started to relaxed, spreading from the place where the youth's fingertips were touching.

「Do you know? — all children have the right to dream.」

Chapter 2: Two In One

A small boat floated on the water at dawn. Two children holding fishing rods were in the boat.

「……」 「—」

Ikuta and Yatori stared at the murky green waters. They were motionless, at most passing around a water canteen and drinking water. Their eyes were on the rod even when they drank. The amazing thing was, they had been keeping at this for more than an hour.

Suddenly— the angling float linked to Ikuta's fishing rod sunk suddenly.

「……!」

The tip of his rod bent two and three times in rapid succession. Feeling his tension, Yatori turned around on the boat. Shortly after, the weight in the youth's arms increased drastically.

「I got a bite—!」

Something connected to the fishing line flashed across the surface of the water swiftly. When she saw that, Yatori toss her rod aside and stood up.

「Hey, what's going on, it's really strong! Is it really a fish? My body is getting dragged in!」

「Lower your waist and pull! You just need to pull it near the water surface, and we can deal with it!」

The girl grabbed on to the boy's belt, and tugged his waist back down. They chose hooks, lines and rod that were exceptionally rugged in case of such a situation, but they couldn't do anything about their weight. The two of them worked together to handle the prey they couldn't take on alone.

「Uguuu…!」

Ikuta pulled with all his might. Shortly after, a large shadow appeared near the water before him. The boy's face was red from exertion, and it was clear from his trembling arms that he wouldn't last much longer.

「Just ten more seconds, hold on!」

After saying that, Yatori picked up a knife for cutting fishing lines and jumped into the water without any hesitation. After enduring the impact of the water, she felt the slithery sensation of the fish's body on her arms as she grab hold of her prey.

Her prey struggled violently to shake her off, but the girl didn't back down and continued holding on strongly. Not only that, she used the opening when her target's movement slowed for an instant to stab the knife in her right hand into the fish's head. She could feel the tip of the knife hitting bones as it sunk deep into the fish.

「— Fuwahh!」

Yatori floated gently out of the water while she still had some air left. She used her buoyancy and the flexibility of her upper body to return easily onto the boat that was above her eye level.

「I dealt a heavy blow to it! How is it now?」

The boy pulled at the rod with rugged breath, and felt far less resistance than before.

「Caught it caught it! Caught it～!」

The victorious cheer echoed throughout the base. Pulling a hand wagon laden with his prey behind him, the dark haired boy puffed his chest out happily, and Yatori beside him looked gleeful too. Soon, the soldiers who heard his cheers gathered near him.

「What is it, Ikuta-kun?— Uwah! What's this thing!?」

「Ohh, it's huge! It's around our height in length.」

「Did the two of you caught it? Well done～」

The soldiers were impressed. Grandma Mari who came to check the situation opened her eyes in surprise:

「Ara, I was wondering what you caught. Isn't that a Gar? To think you two can catch a monster-like thing like this.」

「Grandma Mari, you know this fish?」

「It's a Gar. It lives in large rivers or lakes, where the water flows slowly, and can live very long and grow really big. A large one like this would get caught from time to time, I saw it a few times when I was young.」

The old lady said nostalgically. When they heard that, the soldiers around them looked at each other and said:

「When Grandma Mari was young…」「It should be during the rule of the Emperor from several generations ago, right?」「Definitely before the war strife era.」「Get the others here, let's listen to the valuable experience of someone who had witnessed history.」

「Hahaha!— You lot must have grown tired of living!」

The joking soldiers scampered away in a panic. After beating off those impudent troopers, Grandma Mari walked back as she cracked her knuckles:

「By the way, what do you want to do with the fish? It might be big, but it's still useless.」

「Huh!? Can't we eat it?」

「It's still a fish, so it can be eaten, but I'm not confident that I can cook it well. The body structure of this fish is special. Trying touching the scales.」

The two of them touched the skin of the Gar, and noticed something was wrong:

「I can't peel the scales off…?」「It's true, it's stuck on really firmly.」

「Instead of a fish, it feels closer to an alligator skin, correct? The mouth is as big as a shark too. No matter how many times I see it, I still find it to be a weird creature.」

Grandma Mari said with a shrug. This time, a group of Scientists in white clothes rushed to the three of them. They probably caught wind of the commotion.

「I heard you caught the Lord of the swamp?」 「Uwah! Is that the one! What a big catch!」

The young man and woman walking at the fore said. They were Nazuna and Bajin— Of all the many disciples of Anarai, Ikuta knew them the longest.

「Catching it is great, but the problem is what should we do with it now. Nazuna-nee, Bajin-nii, any ideas?」

「You have no use for it? How about giving it to us? There are still many unknown regarding the diet of large fish, so I want to use this chance to do an autopsy and inspect its organs.」

There was a gleam of curiosity in Nazuna's eyes. When Ikuta heard that, she turned to the girl beside him:

「Will you be fine with that, Yatori?」

「It's fine. I'm glad that the prey we caught can be of use.」

The decisive nature of the vermillion haired girl made her nod in agreement without any hesitation— For the past month, Yatori took reference from Nazuna and the other female researchers, and changed the way she usually spoke. Her stiff military style of speaking was just a distant memory now.

「Okay, the mission to 『catch the lord of the swamp!』 is completed. Next will be—」

「Wait.」

Grandma Mari grabbed the collar of the two children who were eager to move on.

「You must have a hard time pulling this big fellow out of the water. You two are both wet and smell like mud.」

「Hmm… Really? THis much water will dry in no time in the sun.」

「It will be fine if it's just you, but don't forget that your partner is a maiden. If you want to be a proper man in the future, then take better care of the girl beside you.」

The old lady instructed the boy carefully. Ikuta groaned with his arms crossed.

「… You are right.」

「If you understand, then hit the showers… No take a bath. That will be better. Ikuta, don't you have a bath in your house?」

「We have, but it's really small. I prefer the large one that everyone uses.」

「The bath house uses the hot spring, and it takes a lot of work to adjust it to the right temperature. We can't trouble the soldiers just for the sake of the two of you.」

After nonchalantly teaching them the proper way to act, Grandma Mari pushed the two children towards the direction of the Sankrei house.

「Hurry on then. And help me tell Madam Yuka that the snacks she sent some time ago— I think it's called paste cake? I shared it with the kitchen staff, it was delicious.」

「Yes, I will tell her!」

Ikuta answered energetically, then ran with Yatori towards the center of the base. The old lady sighed, and watched the two small figures leave with her hands on her hips.

「… Dripping wet.」

Yuka commented when she saw the children at the entrance. She saw at a glance what they needed, and took action immediately:

「I will borrow, wind sprites from the neighbors. Yatori's partner, can it help too?」

「Of course. Shia, I'm counting on you.」

「Thank you. Can you prepare, the bath water? Just do it, like how I taught you, before.」

From their conversation, it was clear that Yatori was familiar with this place as she visit the Sankrei house often. The two of them fetched water from the well to fill the bathtub. The wind sprite and fire sprite will heat up the water, so they just need to fill the tub.

After staying in the living room and playing chess for tens of minutes, a call came from the bathroom:

「The water is ready. I will prepare a change of clothes, so take your time to bathe.」

After putting the soaked clothes into the basket prepared by Yuka, Ikuta and Yatori went into the steaming bathroom. They washed all the mud on their body, then stepped into the bathtub.

「「…… Phew—!……」」

They sat shoulder to shoulder in the cramped tub, and when their shoulders sank into the water, both of them breathed out.

「… To think that this house has a bathtub.」

「…Ah～ Yes, it's uncommon to find such a small one.」

An awkward smile appeared on the boy's face. He placed his arms on the edge of the bathtub, and explained the origins of this bathtub.

「Dad built this for Mom. Mom loves to bath, but she isn't used to staying with in a place with many people, and always looks uneasy in the bath house. So Dad discussed it with Professor Anarai and made this mini bathtub. Mom was overjoyed back then.」

Ikuta suddenly looked up at the ceiling as if he remembered something and muttered:

「That's right— ever since you came, mother seems more cheerful than usual.」

「Is that so?」

「Yes. She seemed happy that I'm playing with you. I seldom play with kids my age, so that's probably the reason.」

「Speaking of which, you have introduced many people to me, but none of them are our age.」

「One reason is because this is a military base… I also feel happier playing with Professor and the others. I also know some kids my age, but how should I put this… When I want to venture deeper, they won't follow, and when I find something interesting, they would just stared with eyes wide open.」

The boy grumbled unhappily, and pouted. But his mood suddenly turned for the better, and turned to Yatori beside him:

「I was worried that you will be like them, so this is a pleasant surprise. Instead of leaving you behind, I'm in danger of being left by you in the dust.」 When she heard that, the girl puffed up her chest a little:

「Taking the initiative to work hard is only natural. If I just move according to orders, then I won't ever become an independent commander.」

「Commander, huh… That's fine, but why don't you become a Scientist?」

Ikuta suggested out of the blue. Yatori looked at him stiffly.

「… Be a Scientist?」

「That's right, a Scientist. You can analyze the mysteries of the world together with us. If we team up together and take up the challenge, we won't ever be bored again.」

「Specifically speaking, what do you want to do?」

「Everything. Search for unknown creatures in the new continent to the north, find the one piece of legends that sunk in the eastern ocean. There are countless mysteries in the world, can you leave them alone? As for me, I can't do that!」

The boy explained passionately, and lifts his arms up high from the water. The girl fell into deep thoughts with a frown:

「… I can't imagine it.」

「Is that so? But I can. For example, when a large monster attacks us when we are exploring a cave, we will work together to fend it off. Arrows can't pierce it's hard body, but we realized that for that creature living in the dark, light was its weak point. We will chase it out with the searchlight of a Luminous sprite, then lure it to the sunlight at the entrance!」

「What Luminous sprite? You don't have a Sprite, and my partner is a fire Sprite.」

「I just need to form a contract before that time comes. Another example is a blood chilling monster attacking the east bound ship, and we cooperated to chase it away. You cut off the tentacles wrapping around the ship, and when it falters, we will blast it with a secret cannon. The monster won't stand a chance against the cannon that utilize the power of Dynamic Air!」

「Why is it always monster attacks? Isn't there anything else?」

「Something else? Hmm… But titans or dragons doesn't sound too scientific…」

「Enough with enemy attacks, I'm not talking about that. Since it's a journey to an unknown world, there should be all sorts of discovery instead. Like people wearing exotic attires speaking foreign languages, or houses with designs we have never seen before…」

Yatori recounted her experience when she first came to this base. When he heard that, Ikuta's face shone brilliantly.

「See, you can imagine it too. How about it, do you want to see all that with your own eyes?」

When the boy asked her that, images the girl had never seen before flashed across her mind. However— her self restraint activated a second earlier, cutting off her train of thought forcefully:

「… There's no point in thinking about all that. From the very beginning, I'm destined to walk the path of a soldier.」

「Hmm～? That's strange. Isn't what you want to be the important thing?」

「It's not strange. Just like dragons giving birth to dragons and phoenixes are born to phoenixes, I know right from the start what kind of life I will live as an Igsem. That is all there is to it.」

Yatori said firmly with a calm tone. Ikuta blew bubbles in the bath, expressing his dissatisfaction with her rationale:

「… I can't accept that.」

「You don't have to.」

「It is important to me. If you are not with me, I might get eaten by monsters.」

The boy grumbled, and pouted. The girl beside him smiled gently:

「Is it that easy to run into monsters?— I'm going to wash my body.」

After Yatori was warmed up, she stepped out of the bath, picked up the towel and soap, then started cleaning her body. Ikuta stayed silent in the bath for a while, then cast his gaze towards her— In that instant, he opened his eyes wide as if he was struck by lightning:

「…Yatori. Your body is very pretty.」

Her well proportioned bones and muscles, the thin layer of fats and her smooth skin glistening with water droplets— The boy stated his sincere thoughts without rhetorics. The vermillion haired girl stopped moving and looked back at him:

「… This is the first time someone told me that. I'm still growing, so my body is nowhere as feminine as Aunt Yuka.」

「Of course, Mom is the most beautiful woman in the world… But you give a completely different impression. Your entire body had been trained thoroughly, but it don't feel stiff or tough at all. It's slender and strong, how should I put this…」

The boy took a long time to find the proper term. After a long deliberation, he found a metaphor:

「… It's like a carefully crafted sword. When I look at you, I felt like— I'm on the verge of tears.」

「It will be troubling for me if you did cry. Come out of the bath, I will wash your back.」

With no idea how moved he was, Yatori waved the boy over, and sat him down in front of her. As she scrubbed his back with a towel soaked with soap, Ikuta said quietly:

「… Do you know? Pure iron is brittle, and will be stronger if impurities are added.」

「What are you saying?」

「I'm talking about you. It will be great if it includes me too.」

Ikuta lowered his gaze bashfully, and stopped talking. Yatori couldn't understand what he was talking about— with no regards for her confusion, Ikuta's feeling probably first took form at this very moment.

In that afternoon, a seminar for soldiers and scientists to exchange views took place. Following the directives of the commander, the Rising Sun Regiment often held such activities. Yatori naturally expressed her interest to participate, and after getting permission, she joined the discussion together with Ikuta, who was a regular.

「The topic today is the review of ancient battle, the battle of Gashnak, the early days of windgunners being deployed in battle. By

using this battle as a reference, we hope to re-evaluate the effective deployment of the imperial military forces.」

Anarai who was chairing the seminar drew the location of the forces on the chalkboard, and directed the attention of the participants there:

「This was a skirmish that proves advantage of windgunners over the main forces of that era, when engaging from mid distance. In contrast to the one thousand strong imperial pikemen, the windgunners from Garum kingdom numbered just five hundred. The terrain was a flat straight road which was 800 m long and 50 m wide. The two forces detected each other at about 200 m away, and launched an attack at the same time. The result was a crushing defeat for the Empire. Compared to Garum that lost 20% of their forces, more than half of the Imperials were killed— in military terms, they were effectively destroyed.」

The Professor stopped writing the numbers, and turned to the participants:

「Why did the Garum windgunners win, and the imperial pikemen lose? Is there anyway to turn this around? In retrospect, what significance does this battle have in the history of battle? I hope you can discuss these topics.」

On the Professor's urging, Yatori raised her hand first. Anarai nodded, and she stood up:

「I think there are two reasons why the imperial unit lost in Gashnak. They lack experience in fighting windgunners, and their pikemen has low morale.」

「Oh?」

「The experience of fighting against the windgunner's volley is crucial for the commander and soldiers. They had never felt the threat of windgunners in formation before— we can't dismiss this reason.

According to the records, the commander of the pikemen was Captain Rilgin Kade. The reports said that he stayed in the very rear where the bullets wouldn't reach, and ordered the soldiers peltered by gunfire in the front ranks to charge. That might be the right attitude for an officer, but the way he conduct himself cause the morale of his men that were under fire to plummet.」

「Yes～I get that.」「Their superior officer is barking orders from a safe place, of course morale will drop.」「It makes me wants to say 『Why don't you go first』.」

The scientists were forward with their comments, but while some of the soldiers nodded in agreement, others shook their heads as if to say 「you don't understand」. She was confused by the harmonious atmosphere, but the vermillion haired girl continued:

「He didn't have to go all the way up to the frontlines, just moving to the middle ranks will improve morale substantially. And for the problem with morale, it wasn't just because of the command in this battle, but stem from earlier battles— or even the training course of the troops.

In conclusion, they lacked courage. They couldn't muster the courage to charge 200 m to close with the enemy. As a soldier in the current era, I think the failure to nurture brave soldiers is a point of reflection we can learn from the defeat in Gashnak.」

Yatori concluded her argument. As she waited for the reaction from the other participants, a voice came unexpectedly from her side:

「I don't think so.」

Ikuta Sankrei raised an objection against the girl's view. Anarai urged him to speak with a gaze, and the boy presented his opinion in the hall of adults:

「Losing the battle because of a lack of courage— that might be true, but the reflection point isn't that. Anyway, the Empire lost

because they didn't have windguns, right? Losing a battle because of the lack of resources was to be expected.」

Yatori raised her hand again when the boy stopped, and the Professor gave her permission to rebuke:

「Wait, you are straying too far from the topic. The battle of Gashnak was fought between imperial pikemen and Garum windgunners. Since we are reviewing an ancient battle, shouldn't we do so within these boundaries?」

「You mean discussing 『losing because of this』, 『winning if you did that』, right? I am already disagreeing at that level. Because, this is a battle that we are lucky to have lost, correct?」

The girl frowned at his dissent at the fundamental level. Ikuta explained further:

「Because my knowledge is limited, so part of what I'm saying are assumptions. This battle happened when the windgunners were just starting out, so we can assume that the Empire made use of windgunners later than Garum, right? Because of this defeat, the Empire started to realize the importance of windguns as weapons. Anything wrong so far?」

「… That is probably true. Since this was treated as a significant battle where pikemen lost to windgunners, it is only natural to think of this as the reason the military equipment was reevaluated.」

「Then, I tried thinking about it the other way. If they win the battle, then the Empire will incorporate windgunners much later.」

The boy said as he turned his eyes back to the battle map on the blackboard:

「Captain Rilgin lost terribly in the Gashnak battle. It's fortunate that he lost. If he won convincingly, by a close margin or— hmm……」

Ikuta couldn't remember the terms, and Anarai helped him quietly:

「Narrow defeat?」

「Yes, that's it. If it was a narrow defeat, then this battle won't become the reason to reevaluate the military's equipment. It will have to wait until the next time someone lost horribly, which might cause even heavier losses. Shouldn't we be glad that he lost at the right time?」

The boy said as he turned to Yatori besides him. She shook her head without any hesitation:

「I can't be certain on how things might have turned out, but I can't agree with this. This is just consequentialism. In a war, except for strategic retreat to feign defeat, there are no battles that we are better off losing. This is the basic principle of military affairs. For Captain Rilgin who is the frontline commander, he didn't have the authority to prioritize any goals aside from achieving victory before him.」

「You might be right, but even so, should we place the blame squarely on the frontline commander, Captain Rilgin? Assuming he is a mighty warrior and won the battle, it would be a hollow victory that won't lead to a future where windgunners are incorporated into the army. If we have to find a point of reflection, shouldn't we talk about someone with more authority?」

「Higher authority… wait, just how far are you planning to pursue this?」

「All the way to the top. I'm complaining to a General of the Imperial army every day, you know.」

Ikuta said unhappily. His arrogant attitude made the vermillion haired girl sigh:

「… Completing the mission assigned to you by your superior officer is the standard practice for soldiers all over the world. If you ignore that and just focus on criticizing one's superior, it is only natural to be punished for failure to comply with orders.」

When he heard Yatori's harsh criticism, the boy pouted unhappily:

「Unfortunately, I'm a scientist, not a soldier. Anyway, you don't have such constraints either. You are not a soldier, and might not become one too.」

「I definitely will. Like I told you, that's how it is to be born an Igsem.」

「I don't care about the Igsem. I'm talking to Yatori.」

His rebuttal turned even more childish, and Yatori's tone turned harsher from her anger:

「What do you think soldiers are? Given the commanders position, he can't ever say 『I'm glad that I lost』. No matter how history views this battle, it is still a fact that soldiers will get killed or wounded in war. Any commander will be frustrated by his own powerlessness if he lose the battle.」

「I'm not saying that kind of attitude is wrong. However, it is strange to let the people who need to reflect on this the most hide behind this sincerity. If you are saying that they lack courage, and that Captain Rilgin who stayed in the rear ranks is timid, then isn't the top brass who issued the order from even further back even more of a coward? Why not blame them?」

「The necessary qualities of a frontline commander and high ranking officers are different, of course! The high ranking officers had frontline experience as junior officers in the past too, since they need substantial achievements in the frontlines to be promoted up the ranks. It is wrong to accuse the high ranking officers of being cowards just because of the position they are in!」

「It might look that way on the surface! But after climbing up the ranks, they won't give up their position to their subordinates so easily, right? It is always the junior officers who are killed in battle,

and the Empire army is growing more dependent on their hard work to make up for the incompetent top brass!」

The more they argue, the more emotional they got. As they watched the two children hold on to their viewpoints steadfastedly, the other participants who had been relegated to observers whispered quietly among themselves:

「Incredible, the sparks are flying from the debate.」「We have been completely sidelined.」「It's too hard to join in~ Just the sight of them is enough to scorch me from the brightness of their youth～」「What a high level quarrel between kids.」「Want to bet on the winner? 500 on Yatori.」「You are on, I bet 500 on Ikuta.」「How do you decide on the winner of a debate? When one side gives up?」「It will be better to bet which one runs out of breath.」「Or the one who bite their tongue.」

The scientists started chatting idly. The two subjects weren't aware of that, as they stood so close together that their foreheads were almost touching.

「You don't even know that much about the inner workings of the organization, and you are pretending to be knowledgeable…!」

「Your position isn't that different from me, but you are always saying things in a disillusioned way!」

They were enraged, but didn't get physical because of their pride. If they throw the first punch in an argument, that was as good as admitting their loss. They could tell right from wrong despite their young age, and only fought with their words.

「— Erm, well, I know that I'm being harshly criticized.」

A hoarse and casual voice interjected into the heated torrent. Everyone turned their gaze to the entrance, and found Bada Sankrei standing there with his hand on the door.

「Gramps Anarai, is that the topic for today?」

「The topic was about the battle of Gashnak, but the debate leapt exponentially, and became like this.」

「You are just pretending to be retarded. You have no intention of mediating the flow of the discussion.」

「If I don’t let them become aware of the parts they can’t stay calm about, we won’t be able to have a calm discussion.」

The old sage feigned ignorance, and gave up his spot to Bada. The commandant of the Rising Sun Regiment stood on the podium in Anarai’s place, then grinned with his elbows on the table.

「Since I’m being accused of being a villain clinging onto my position, then I have to say a few words. Both Yatori-chan and my dumb son has their logic. Yatori-chan pointed out the tactical error from the perspective of a frontline commander, while my son used the fearless perspective of a scientist to highlight the mistake on the strategic level. Let me give a quick explanation, tactics is about the way to fight in a battle, while strategy involves how a war is fought.

Your difference in opinions stem from the difference in your perspectives— but it will be troubling to determine which perspective is right.」

Bada scratched his head and looked at the vermillion haired girl:

「From the viewpoint of a soldier, Yatorichan is definitely correct. After all, the rank and file had to follow orders from the top. As we have to execute dangerous mission with the risk of death, if the relationship between the commander and the soldiers isn’t solid, then the organization can’t operate properly. That is the reason why soldiers aren’t permitted to criticize their superiors. Be it now, the present or the future, the military will always be an authoritative and tall structure organization. My stupid son doesn’t understand this basic rules, what a pain.」

Bada turned to his son and shrug with a sigh. Before the boy could retort, he quickly continued:

「However— when I was running around as a frontline commander, the most torturing thing for me is the inflexible organization where subordinates can't question their superiors.

In this system, if the superior officer is incompetent, then everyone under him will suffer. And this will carry on until that officer admit his mistakes, which is usually after we suffer heavy loss on the battlefield. My son is right about this, high ranking officers usually won't admit their mistake. They had to take responsibility for formulating the strategy, but it is hard to determine if they are successful or not. I went out of my way to submit a proposal to amend the plan, but my superior will rebuke it most of the time, saying 『that's unnecessary, the battle will turn for the better』... To be honest, it will be great if that dumb Colonel fell down the stairs earlier.」

Bada couldn't help grumbling. He cleared his throat and pretend nothing happen, then continued:

「I can only say this now, but there were many battles in order to make excuses to ignore the orders of superiors. What a pain~ to be frank, I want to shout: 『Enough, just shut up and let the people in the frontline handle everything!』 However, there is no helping it if strange orders comes. For example, an order to defend a fort for a month with three days worth of food, and without any resupply…? What is this? Are they expecting us to eat dirt? Are they retarded? Are they trying to kill us?」

The soldiers all smiled wryly at his words. As he reminisced the harsh battles he had to face in the past, Bada sighed deeply:

「If it is the job of soldiers on the frontline to take care of problems their superior throw at them, then there's nothing more to discuss. But I really hated such a being in such a position, and don't wish my subordinates to go through the same thing I did. So I decided to do whatever I want when I have my own army. That is the

reason for this seminar— look, you can see how unceremonious this bunch are, right?」

Bada said as he pointed at the group sitting in a row. That was true, there wasn't any barriers between the senior officers and troopers, even the scientist in white that weren't soldiers didn't look out of place. This scene showed the current state of the Rising Sun Regiment.

「This isn't a war council, but a seminar to exchange views, so everyone could share opinions from their perspective without any fear of repercussion. So the opinions of Yatori-chan and my son are equally valid. As long as you follow the etiquettes for discussion, there are no restrictions on criticism against superior officers.」

Bada smiled after saying that. The vermillion haired girl couldn't accept this immediately and said:

「… Can a military organization function if you permit soldiers to question authority?」

「There are adverse effects, but it has been functioning so far, and I plan to continue it in the future too. This is my ideal army with 『clear communication channels』.」

After making this conclusion with a mild tone, Bada raised the corners of his lips:

「However— Yatori-chan and my son are too young, and won't stop your squabbles just because an adult like me intervened.」

As he stared at the two children with his dark eyes, he announced slowly:

「Have a match then. You don't need to be reserved, it is the nature of the young ones to feel dissatisfied if their difference isn't resolved.」

「Your debate is about the responsibilities of a frontline commander and the commanding officer— simply put, it's the issue

of how to make use of your subordinates. If you want to understand the situation, the best way is to try running a group for yourself.」

Bada brought Ikuta and Yatori out of the seminar, and mustered the soldiers after stating the topic. He seemed to have made arrangements ahead of time, and the men were gathered in no time.

「So I will lend you a battalion, use them to complete the 『missions』 in the future.」

The two children stood blankly in front of the 600 men in tidy formation. Yatori came to her senses a few seconds later, and asked anxiously:

「… W-Won't this affect the operation of the regiment?」

「They are volunteers from the reserves, so you don't need to worry about that. Besides, answering to the needs of children is the responsibility of adults.」

Bada declared readily. The vermillion haired girl fell into deep thought with a troubled face:

「… Right now, I only have experience with an infantry platoon.」

「Really～ the Igsem house have practical lessons to such an extent…? But even so, the toys I prepared are much bigger. Fufufu, I will boast this to Sol next time.」

It was his son's turn to ask the deviously smiling father:

「So Yatori and I will command 300 men each?」

「No, that's not it. Like I said, what you need to learn is the difference in requirement and scope for frontline commanders and the commanding officer. Your mission is to take turns to command these 600 men.」

「So I will be the commanding officer for today's mission, and Yatori will be the commanding officer for tomorrow's mission?」

「That's right. But the mission might not be completed within one day, and you will need to assume the same role for several days. Of course, you will take turns to share the opportunities equally.」

The boy started groaning in deep thoughts after hearing the explanation. Yatori then asked:

「The duties of the commanding officer is to draw up the battle plan, roster the unit, and prepare the logistics to accomplish the given mission, correct?」

「That's the gist of it, but don't push yourself too hard. We will take care of the trivial and troublesome routine work, your life in the base will be the same as before. Just take it that your job as the commanding officer will start when you set off from base, and end when you return.」

「After the unit set off according to the plans, will the commanding officer just wait in the base? Isn't that boring?」

「It's not that easy. The commanding officer will have to tag along, but the frontline commander will have the authority on the grounds. Which means— no matter what happens, you can't intervene.」

When they heard that, Ikuta and Yatori fell silent. Bada smiled quietly, having seen through their worries:

「Oh, both of you realized it? That's right— you will witness from the box seat the results of your orders and the flaws of your plans. It will be too late even if you realize your mistakes on the ground, and couldn't do anything except cowering as you listen to the grumbles of the troopers. Being responsible to the smiles or tears of 600 men is really painful.」

After saying that with a taunting tone, he looked at the faces of the two children in turn:

「Oh, are you scared? At this time? Want to call it off?」

Bada smiled cockily. Ikuta and Yatori glared at him with eyes full of spirit:

「Of course —」 「— not!」

After receiving similar answers from them, Bada nodded approvingly.

「That's more like it, young ones. Then I will give you your first mission— are you ready?」



From that moment on, the long match between Ikuta and Yatori started.

It was difficult right from the start. Problems occurred daily, hourly, or even every other minute, and they quickly learned how difficult it was to execute everything according to plan. The pace of their march would be affected by the weather, and if they pushed the soldiers to make up for the half day they lost, the accumulated fatigue would linger on for several days.

「Huh? I recall that the mission is just to march 20 km out and then return, right? Why are the troops so exhausted～?」

At the end of the first day, Bada looked at the ragged faces of the returning soldiers and asked cheekily. Ikuta who took on the role of the commanding officer to plan the march, and Yatori who assumed the role of front line commander both lowered their heads and grit their teeth.

「… There are lapses in my plan. I didn't take the terrain and difference in altitude into account, and merely estimated the time needed by distance. When we reach a cramp place, we had to reorganize the troops, which took more time than I thought…」

「No, it's because my commanding abilities are lacking. I took too much time to deal with the change in terrain, and the accumulated delays affected the entire schedule… The sudden downpour made the ground muddier and visibility worse than I expected. We lost our way because of bad weather, which drained the soldiers both physically and mentally.」

「Hmmp～ Then don't make the same mistakes next time.」

After hearing their explanation, Bada brushed it off and gave them the second mission without offering any advice― the next evening, he tilted his head at the battalion that arrived back at base:

「Hmm～ Not only did you return later than scheduled, the stomachs of the soldiers are all grumbling… What happened?」

He urged the two to explain their failures, so Ikuta and Yatori answered through gritted teeth:

「… The water level at the river crossing point had risen because of yesterday's rain, and when we crossed it, more than half the provision was damaged…」

「… I designated the bridge nearby as the alternative route, but my plans stated that it should only be used when 『the water level is too high for the river crossing to be possible』… The reality on the ground was 『it is possible to cross the river even if the water is at waist level』, so the Ikuta who is the commander has to forcefully cross the river…」

「Oh～ so water got into their food, and many of the soldiers starved because of that?— Ahaha! You two are so useless.」

Bada's words stabbed at their heart. Unable to bear with the silence, the boy and girl said at the same time:

「There's nothing wrong with Yatori's plan! If I was smarter before the river crossing, I would have told them to stack the food at the top of the bag!」

「It's not Ikuta's fault! I should have included the possible loss of provisions during the river crossing in my plans!」

They pushed the blame in opposite directions. After being stunned for a moment, they started glaring at each other with angry faces:

「I said it's my fault! Shut up, Yatori!」

「You shut up! Don't butt into the things I need to reflect on!」

Neither of them gave in, and the sight of them fighting made Bada burst out in laughter:

「Ahaha!— Hey, son. When you are confident of performing your role well, it's hard to put the blame on the other party when you run into such a situation, right?」

「……!」

「Yo, Yatori-chan. You have a forthright personality, and instead of blaming others, you can't help reflecting on your own mistakes as the commanding officer, right?」

「……!」

「Really now… how noble of you two. But even so, you can't hog the points that needed to be reflected on. That is your common property, so share it properly.」

The commandant of the Rising Sun Regiment patted the shoulders of the children and advised them calmly:

「Someone else's failure might happen to you one day too. Build on your mistakes and face the next mission confidently.」

Ikuta and Yatori turned silent again. Bada went behind them, and pushed them from the back:

「Or rather, go take a bath. My wife prepared the bath water, so go and take a dip.」

In the bath room filled with steam, the boy and girl sat shoulder to shoulder as they soaked their entire body up to their neck. They stayed silent for quite a long time.

「… Yesterday and today, we experienced one cycle of each other's roles.」

「… That's right. In any case, let's sort out the reflection points.」

Neither of them had objections. In order to find the reason behind their second failure, the two of them trade opinions:

「First is the commanding officer. Our common mistake is that we made our decisions without seeing the situation at the grounds.」

「It's frustrating, but I feel the same. I thought I covered everything during the planning phase, but when it's being executed, I

realized that it’s full of holes. My face was red from shame during several scenarios yesterday.」

「That’s true. To be frank, given our lack of experience, it’s natural for there to be flaws in our planning. Even if we can foresee the problems that might happen during a march, but there is no way we can foresee situations we have never even heard.」

「Correct… so we can only slowly refine the accuracy of the plan over time.」

Ikuta arrived at a conclusion as he hugged his knees in the bath. Feeling that the discussion had stagnated, he changed to a new topic:

「What do you think about being the commander on the ground?」

「It’s tough because of my lack of experience. I can’t even roster the unit properly without the advice of the sergeants.」

「Yes, that’s right. However, I think both you and I can actually do much better than this.」

Seeing Yatori asking the meaning behind his words with a gaze, the boy continued:

「You probably noticed already. For yesterday and today— the one drafting the plan as the commanding officer became a burden on the grounds.」

「If we are discussing the flaws in the plans, won’t we be going back to the previous topic?」

「No, that’s not what I mean. How should I put this, it can’t be helped that there are plenty of holes in the plan… so we don’t have to be confined by the plan if we can avoid them within reason.」

Stopping here for the moment, Ikuta looked up at the ceiling in deep thought:

「Like, for the mission yesterday, you were forced to adhere to the route and schedule. I chose the shortest route on the map, but it actually included many small roads and slopes. I ended up ordering you to take a time consuming and difficult route. You must have realized it midway, right?」

「… Yes. I compared the map to the terrain before me, and felt that there are better routes than the one assigned— I don't deny that I felt this way quite a number of times.」

「I guess as much. It was the same for me, if not for the constraint of the plan, I would have made a detour pass the river crossing.」

「… I agree. It was vexing for me since I couldn't intervene. It was possible to cross the river as it was waist deep, but the flow was fast and there might be accidents. Even if we dismiss the problem with the provision, we should have made the detour to be safe.」

They were in consensus so far, and looked at each other.

「That's true. Simply put… From yesterday and today's example, we can see…」

「That the commander on the ground might be able to make the right decision.」

Phew~ They exhaled at the same time. As they had soaked in the hot water for a while now, their minds turned cloudy. They stepped up before they got dizzy, and started washing themselves.

「For the commanding officer, instead of covering the flaws in the plan— it might be better to relax control of the overall plan.」

「I think so too. There are no perfect plans, so just let the frontline commander make the decision. 『Use your judgement based on the situation on the grounds』 — we should include this instruction in the plans.」

「That's dereliction of duty— I want t say that, but your answer is probably right. If the planner is incapable, and still deprive the

personnel on the ground of their ability to make up for the loopholes, that's putting the cart before the horse.」

As they scooped up warm water to splash over their bodies, Ikuta and Yatori looked at each other in the eyes from close up.

「There are no ends to covering up the holes of the plans. But even so, we should have an idea on where the flaws might pop up.」

「Just intentionally leave enough free room in the plans for the commander on the ground to fill in the gaps.」

The moment they decided on the plan, both of them showed a bold smile.

Their reflection meeting proved useful, as Ikuta and Yatori completed the next two missions without any major error. Which parts should be in the plans, and which areas should be left for the commander to decide— it was still rough, but they achieved good results after they thought about the balance between the two.

「— I see, it looks like the two of you had gotten out of your initial useless state.」

When he saw the soldiers return to base with loads of energy to spare, Bada acknowledged their improvement. But he blocked the path of the two children with his usual cocky demeanour:

「In that case, I will not hold back and increase the difficulty of the missions. Fufufu, can you whippersnappers keep up?」

And true to his words, as the two of them grew more capable, the difficulty of their assignment increased gradually and become more demanding.

One of the mission involves sending Ikuta's group to a forest one day's journey away to harvest wood to construct watchtowers. The time limit was the day after tomorrow, when construction begins. Yatori was the commanding officer this time, while Ikuta assumed the role of commander on the ground, and they reached the

destination without any hiccups— but the problem happened when the tree felling operation started.

「Ikuta-kun— No, battalion commander! This tree is a problem!」

The soldiers swinging axes groaned in unison. The blade of the axes didn't cut into the tree's bark as easily as they expected. The surprised Ikuta picked up an axe to try for himself, and found the reason:

「This tree has dense fibre and is very hard…! It will take much longer than expected to fell them!」

Bada tasked them to collect hardwood called Isunoki. It was known for its hardness and density, which made it an excellent building material. However, chopping and processing them requires a lot of effort.

「It is very heavy too… Transporting them would affect the speed of the return trip too.」

The more he thought about it, the harder it was for him to return on schedule. Ikuta who was forced to amend the plans gestured to Yatori who was observing from a distance with his eyes.

「… Collecting and transport of the trees would be left to the discretion of the frontline commander, right? I will think of a way!」

After Ikuta made his decision, he immediately recalled the soldiers scheduled to rest, and rostered them into shifts, so the axes wouldn't stop swinging from fatigue. The group managed to chop the wood before dusk, and after resting for 30 minutes, they quickly set off back to base.

「Is this really fine, boy? If you lead the way, we might get lost even if we tried to march through the night.」

「We will keep going until I can't recognize the road, and make camp there. I think we can cover more ground this way then setting

off at dawn. We can't go too fast with the heavy wood, and everyone will be tired no matter what we do…」

The soldiers keep marching to make up for their slow pace. However— despite their hard work, they still fell far behind schedule on the second day. Ikuta scratched his head:

「Really now~ it's no good. We will never make it in time! Can we only prepare to be late…!」

He stamped his feet frustratingly. He then suddenly felt a gaze on him, and turned around.

「Yatori…」

Crimson eyes stared right at the boy. Even though she was not allowed to intervene, Yatorishino Igsem showed no signs of anxiety or frustration, and stood tall.

Don't give up, there's a way— Her eyes seemed to be saying that, and Ikuta took out the plans.

「… Did I miss something? Is there any…」

The route, schedule and objective— he checked the contents of the plans again to search for a way out of his current predicament. When he read the passage in the middle of the plans, he was drawn to a sentence he didn't pay attention to earlier:

— The objective of collecting the wood: material to construct three watchtowers around the base. Work will start at the end of the mission, and scheduled to finish within five days. The schedule for this mission is determined by working backwards from the start date of the construction.

「… Construction of watchtowers.」

After muttering that, an idea flashed across Ikuta's mind.

「—Oh～?」

That evening, the commandant of the Rising Sun Regiment intentionally made a baffled face when he saw Ikuta's group return on schedule.

「That's all the timber you collected? I asked at least twice as much.」

Bada pointed at the logs on the twenty odd hand wagons, and highlighted that without reservation. The dark haired boy took on this taunt and walked forth:

「… The other half is in a village along the way. It will be too heavy to ferry all of them in one shot and return to base by today.」

「So you only brought half? That's an understandable decision, but that's only 50 points at best. We can't build three watch towers with these materials. Even if you went back to get them, it will delay the construction.」

Ikuta looked at his father boldly despite this harsh criticism:

「We will go and retrieve them of course. But it won't affect the construction schedule.」

「Hmm? Why is that?」

「Because there is enough material to start the construction right now, there is no need to wait for the rest of the wood to come. The foundations of all three watch towers can be built at the same time, and no time will be wasted before the other half of the materials reach here. And of course, we will ensure that the balance is delivered before the materials here are depleted.」

Bada looked at his son with a groan, and the boy continued with a firmer tone:

「Dad, you only stated the construction schedule for this mission. Hence, Yatori has the authority to decide on the mission timeline if it meets the construction deadline. Look, the remarks column of the plan states—『The commander on the ground is free to make slight

deviation to the plans to address any safety concerns and to adhere to the construction schedule.』」

The boy showed the documents from his bag, and snorted arrogantly:

「… Hey, just a retort, how can freshly cut timber be used for construction? I understand that you want to increase the difficulty of the mission, but the settings isn't realistic, Dad.」

He pointed out victoriously, and Bada thought for a while before shrugging with an awkward smile:

「… Minus one point for me then. It seems that Yatori-chan saw through what will happen when she drafted her plans.」

He glanced at the girl with his dark eyes, and Yatori shook her head with a smile:

「Not at all. I just thought about situations where we couldn't transport all the timber in one go, such as the handwagons breaking down or losing some of the materials due to other circumstances. There is no end to thinking about all the possibilities, so as the commanding officer, I drew up a plan that could be amended to deal with the situation on the ground.」

「That's a wise move. By the way, I didn't expect you to comment on the construction method too… However, I can't find any reason to rebuke this proposal. The content is logical too, I don't know about other armies, but in the Rising Sun Regiment, it is common for subordinates to propose useful plans to their superiors. It's very common.」

When they heard that, Ikuta and Yatori high fived with their right hand. Bada looked at the children with a smile and continued:

「Alright, since I lost a point, I want to ask— what do you think? After taking turns to play the roles of commanding officer and the commander on the ground, which one of you won the debate?」

The two kids looked at each other at this question. They had long forgotten the reason for their quarrel.

「Now that you mentioned it, this is a match.」 「We will be self evaluating?」

「Of course. It will be pointless if both of you can't accept the outcome.」

Bada urged them with a serious face and his arms crossed. After staring at each other for a few seconds, the children answered:

「… I will do that then. To be honest, we are not at a level to worry about winning or losing. We can't do anything without the help of the sergeants.」

「We pointed out each other's mistake and gave them careful thought, and barely managed to operate the unit. During this entire process, we can't spare the effort to compete against each other.」

The two of them answered together. The boy and guy laughed awkwardly as they think back on all the mistakes they made.

「— I know, it's the same for me too.」

Bada raised the corners of his lips at the children's answer, and looked at the soldiers formed up behind them:

「A commanding officer can't work without relying on his subordinates. If the commanding officer is incompetent, it will be tough for his charges too. You have done well to understand this point. Anyway, be it in the base or on the grounds, it is retarded to think that you are fighting a war on your own.」

Feeling glad that the children learned this important lesson, the famous imperial general smiled with his back to the setting sun:

「Remember this well. A war isn't fought by strategists, formidable generals or geniuses alone. It's fought by everyone together.」

With the completion of this task, their days of running missions hectically ended for now. But because they were too busy to deal

with other things during this time, they became hotly sought after by the other groups on base, and had no time to stay bored.

On this day, Ikuta and Yatori accepted the invitation by Bajin, Nazuna and the scientists to investigate the environment. The group of seven with varying ages and gender walked through the plains with horses laden with cargo.

「… It felt like ages ago since we moved around with a whole battalion of soldiers.」

「That's right… After hustling around so much, this feels like a load off my shoulders.」

The two of them were a little troubled by the drastic change in their environment. To pull them out of that dissonance, the scientists spoke to them eagerly:

「We feel lonely when you two kept going on missions.」

「That's right. Ikuta and Yatori-chan suddenly stopped showing up, so I thought you grew tired of us.」

「Sorry for worrying you.」 「Like I said, it's all Dad's fault.」

As they chatted, the group of seven reached the observation station that will serve as their base. It was a run down cabin with a wide unobstructed view of the surroundings, built on the top of a hill. The damaged grass roof and walls erected with thin wooden boards made it look incredibly simple. There is barely enough space for seven people to sleep, and it was questionable if it can even protect the inhabitants from the elements.

However, they already expected that and prepared camping equipment. The inspection was just for three days and two nights, so they weren't too concerned with the residence. After the group checked the door, they carried the luggage into the cabin──however…

「… Hmm? I don't see the measuring apparatus. Bajin, is there any more luggage outside?」

Nazuna asked as she checked the contents of their bags. Bajin who was drinking water and resting behind her froze for a moment.

「… The research this time includes the terrain too?」

「Of course, didn't I say that right from the start— Did you!」

The face of the female scientist turned moody instantly. Realizing that he couldn't avoid the blame, Bajin turned to her timidly—

「I-I left it at the base— Uwah!」

Because he made unnecessary movements, his head was hit squarely by his colleague's 50 cm long compass.

「— Sigh～ thanks to Bajin-nii, we get to laze around for the entire day～」

Ikuta looked out of the grilled window and grumbled with a sigh. The cabin's occupants were just him, Yatori, the fire sprite Shia, and the Luminous and water sprites left behind by the scientists. The rest of them went left their heavy bags here and went back to base. 「We will be right back, stay here to watch the bags.」—they told the two children.

「The main objective is to study the flora and fauna here, right? Isn't there anything we can do first?」

「There is, we can just observe— but, you will understand by looking around you.」

Ikuta answered in low spirits, and gestured to the scenery outside with his eyes. There were only open plains out there, and the place seemed to have a weak presence of life.

「Because of the dry spell around this area, the objective of this study is to confirm 『how much had the flora and fauna here have fallen』. There are a lot of tasks like counting every piece of dried leaves, and it's not exciting at all.」

「Since it's a job you are doing begrudgingly, shouldn't you get it over with quickly?— Let's go outside. You know what plants involved in the study, right? Tell me too.」

「Hmm～」

Yatori's determination to work remained the same. Ikuta got dragged reluctantly out of the cabin.

「Wait, it's fine to go out and perform the study, but let's chop the wood we will need for tonight first. You don't want to swing an axe after running around the whole day, right?」

「That's true. Where's the firewood?」

「They should be piled up behind the cabin. I will go prepare it first, bring the axe over. It's hanging on the right side of the cabin's entrance.」

Ikuta told the girl, and went to the back of the cabin. He found the pile of firewood immediately, but didn't see the tree stump that would serve as a chopping board,

「Weird, I thought there's a stump around here?」

The boy looked around and suddenly kicked into something hard. He looked down, and saw the silhouette of the stump buried in sand.

「Oh, so it had been buried… I have to dig it out.」

Ikuta used his hands and feet to clear the sand around the stump, and heard footsteps behind him. Thinking it was Yatori, the boy said:

「Wait a minute, the stump got covered in sand. I will dig it out—」

Ikuta who was squatting before the stump turned back— and met a gaze at his eye level. A quadruped animal with grey fur and long sharp fangs stared right back at him.

「— in no time.」

「It's way too rusty.」

Yatori sigh at the sight of the layer of brown rust covering the axe's blade.

「It's meant to chop wood, but a cutting tool is still a cutting tool, if it's not maintained properly… Is there a grinding stone here?」

Putting the axe onto the floor, Yatori rummage the surrounding areas. There were plenty of miscellaneous objects around the cabin, so there was probably a grinding stone lying around somewhere— as she was thinking about that, a cry came from behind the cabin:

「There's a wolf!」

The girl immediately dashed out of the cabin when she heard that, with the axe gripped firmly in her right hand. From how tense the voice was, it was clearly not a joke.

She quickly went around to the back of the cabin, and found the stiff faced Ikuta facing off against a growling wolf. The girl gasped. The hind leg of the wolf was bulging as it prepared to pounce.

「Hee!」

Yatori made the split second decision to throw the axe in her hand. Her surprise attack made the wolf back away in a panic, and Ikuta escaped while the wolf was distracted. The two of them ran back to the front of the cabin at full speed, and slid into the open door.

「Hahh! Hahh…! T-That's scary～」

Ikuta locked the door and tried to steady his ragged breathing. Yatori sprinted to the grilled window and watched the outside of the cabin warily.

「I didn't know there were wolves around here.」

「Neither did I. This place is just half a day's journey from the base by foot.」

The boy said as he looked at the window. At that moment, Yatori's face turned gloomy while keeping her eyes peeled:

「… Is that so? Our opponent isn't a lone wolf.」

When he heard her ominous wording, Ikuta stood up and peeked out the window. He gasped— there was a second, third and fourth wolf. Just from what he could see, there were four wolves circling around outside.

「It seems that — we are in a bit of a pinch.」

The boy muttered with the corner of his lips cramping. The girl beside him pursed her lips.

A little more than two hours later, the wolves surrounding them showed no signs of leaving.

「It doesn't look like they will give up easily.」

Yatori muttered as she stood beside the window. In this dangerous situation, she wore both her blades on her waist. Even though she was ready for battle, Ikuta was reluctant to accept this:

「… How strange～ wolves aren't creatures that will actively attack humans. They will basically stay away from places with human presence, and the occasional instances of wolf attacks only happen because humans invaded their territory…」

「All the wolves look very thin. Because of the recent dry spell, they got so hungry that they are hunting for food in the villages nearby… I think that's what's happening.」

Yatori deduced from the information she had on hand, and turned to the boy:

「Anyway, since they refuse to leave, we have to think of a counter strategy. This cabin is by no means sturdy, and the wolves might ram through the more fragile parts. And even if we continue to defend stubbornly…」

「… Yes, I know. Bajin-nii and the others who will return to the cabin tomorrow will be in danger.」

Ikuta said, recognizing that this was the most serious crisis he had experienced. Yatori also nodded stiffly:

「There are five in Bajin-nii's group, and we have seen six wolves so far. The wolves have the advantage in numbers. If we just stay put until tomorrow, the wolves might attack the humans that just showed up.」

「I heard wolves will stalk the same prey for several days. I think we should give up the optimistic assumption that they will leave tomorrow.」

The air around the girl turned sharp. Ikuta stared at her and asked solemnly:

「Yatori, just to confirm, do you have any experience fighting with wolves?」

「No. My father hired many martial artist to my home, but that didn't include animals. I'm confident of dealing with one, but there are at least six here… Besides that...」

She returned her gaze out the window and continued:

「One of the wolves is one size bigger, and probably the leader of the pack— and seemed formidable. It had the aura of a seasoned warrior, and is probably really tough.」

She analyzed the enemy forces with the eyes of a soldier, while Ikuta just smiled:

「… I'm relieved. I was afraid that you will seriously say that you will go out there and massacre them all.」

「I'm not that confident of my prowess, sorry for betraying your expectations.」

「Didn't I tell you that I'm relieved? This means that I get to play a part too.」

The boy said light heartedly, and surveyed the messy room again:

「Our weapons… first is your blades and a crossbow in the cabin— it's non-military use, and don't have a spear attachment— and 17

crossbow bolts. There are planks to repair the cabin, and daily necessities that might prove useful.」

Ikuta grasped the materials on hand and their numbers, and told the vermillion haired girl in simple terms what he thinks the items can or cannot do.

「The mission is to 『Beat off the wolves surrounding the cabin』, which will be completed by the both of us. Working back the time needed for a round trip from here to the base, the time limit is 9 am tomorrow. Anything look out of place?」

Yatori was surprised that the boy actively proposed this plan, but she didn't hesitate and shook her head.

「—No. Let's draw up the battle plans.」

Tormented by their hunger, the beasts encircled the cabin.

There was a tense air around the wolf pack. It was unwise for them to linger in human territory for too long. Aside from the young wolves that didn't know any fear, the pack leader understood the threat of humans very well— he knew how dangerous this sly opponent that had neither fangs nor claws could be.

His elder brother was killed by a lump of lead shot out of a steel tube, and his mother and another brother died after eating poison bait. He recalled the memories that made his hair stand on ends, and understood that this wisdom was the reason why he could survive for so long. Do not lay your hands on the human and the critters raised in their territories, or you will face terrible consequences— that was the rule he demanded strictly of his pack.

However— No matter how fearsome a foe they might be, there was no choice when food was scarce.

The long drought resulted in a sharp drop in the number of herbivores in this area. The plants had wilted, and the animals that feed on them would starve too. Wolves that were on the top of this

food chain couldn't escape from this effect. Their last meal was a hare they caught five days ago.

They had to think of something. The minimum condition of being a leader was to not let his pack starve.

They were even ready for a conflict against the other packs, and headed out of their wide territory. When this didn't yield any satisfying results, they broke their taboo and headed to the villages nearby. That was when the leading wolf encountered the human cub.

The wolf didn't finish off the prey, and let them escape into the cabin, but that couldn't be helped. Wolves were cautious in a hunt, and the norm was for the pack to hunt one prey. What they wanted was the results from the pack working together, not the reckless bravery of facing an opponent alone.

The leader ground its teeth as he thought— how should they chase the prey out of hiding?

Two human cubs were their opponents. From the sound coming from the cabin, there wasn't any older humans inside. But after that first encounter, the prey had grown wary of them.

He didn't think that continuing the encirclement would yield any results. With that conclusion, he howled to warn his packmates to not lose their heads, and for all the wolves including himself to back away from the vicinity of the cabin. No matter what kind of attack was used, the first step was to wait for the foes to let their guard down.

Night would be falling soon. The beasts hid in the shadows of the boulders and rocks to observe the cabin, which suddenly lit up. The leader knew— that was the light from the small creature that cohabits with the humans.

Human had poorer night vision than them. In place of that, those small creatures provide light to the humans. They would also

sometimes produce terrifying fire. If he wanted to attack by the cover of night, he had to keep that in mind.

At this moment, a flash of white light from the cabin caught the eyes of the wary leader.

—!

The leader used his sharp eyes to restrained his excited packmates that almost stood up, and remain still— the prey might have shown an opening, but being too hasty would mess everything up.

Even if the door was open, that was just the start of the problem. Was the prey going out? They might do so when they saw us giving up and leave. In that case, they just need to attack together when the humans leave the cabin.

Or they were just checking the situation from the door gap. As the window was small, the humans inside would have a limited view of the outside. Maybe they thought it wasn't completely safe, and opened the door slightly to take a look.

In any case, the prey was still very guarded. It wasn't time to show their cards— as he was in the midst of deciding, the light before him suddenly turned intense.

—?

Subverting the leader's prediction, the cabin's door opened completely, and showed no signs of closing again. There was a wave of commotion from his packmates, as they cast their gaze towards the leader— isn't this a great chance?

In contrast to his excited packmates, the leaders felt dubious about the suspicious situation. This looked like a trap to lure them in. However, it was difficult to let his younger packmates understand his worries. His spouse and him were the only ones in the pack that experienced how cunning the humans were.

The patience of his packmates were almost at their limits. This long period of hunger was draining on their sanity.

It would be near impossible to demand his packmates to stay calm and let this opportunity go— the pack leader arrived at this conclusion, and decided to take the risk.

「— The presence of the wolves are getting closer.」

In the tense cabin that was ready for battle, Yatori with her back to the wall on the left side of the door warned quietly. Ikuta who was squatting on the right nodded nervously.

「They are speeding up! —They are here!」

The wolf in front charged into the cabin and maintained its momentum, but was blocked by the barrier piled up inside the door. It stopped before the barrier, killing its inertia.

「Hee!」

At that instant, Ikuta pulled the ropes at the right moment. The makeshift trap was activated, tightening the noose on the wolf's hind feet and suspending it in midair.

「Shoot the closest ones, Yatori!」 「Roger!」

Yatori shot mercilessly with her crossbow at the wolves charging in to rescue their packmate. Painful yelps echoed in the dark, and after two wolves were shot, the pack stopped approaching from the front. Seeing that the first wave was over, the vermillion haired girl reported the results:

「Two wolves were shot! But they are non-fatal wounds!」

「What about the leader? Can you see from there?」

「I saw three wolves, but not the leader—」

Yatori's report was cut off by a violent creak at the back of the cabin. The two of them looked back with pale faces:

「They are ramming the wall there to break in!」 「Was that frontal assault just a diversion?」

Ikuta left his post for the moment and ran to the back wall that was under attack. Yatori was about to follow when she felt a presence, and looked back at the wall.

「—」

She stared into the dark with the night vision technique her father taught her. And under the pale moonlight, she saw a wolf that was a size bigger than the rest charging in from about ten meters away. It was the large pack leader.

「—? The main attack is over here—!」

The leader ran right to the door, stepped onto its packmates back and jumped. Yatori judged right before it jumped that it would clear the obstacles, and kicked the door close. That was a smart instantaneous decision, which barely stopped the invasion of the leader.

「That was close…! Ikuta, how's the wall over there?」

「It's just makeshift measures, but I'm repairing the wall! This cabin is more fragile than I expected!」

The boy yelled as he swung his hammer. Yatori returned her eyes to the front, and heard heavy footsteps at the other side of the closed door. The wolf that was suspended had broken free of its bounds. The rope trap was disarmed when she kicked the door, so this couldn't be helped.

A moment later, there was a howl from outside. The pressure of the beasts encirclement relaxed after that.

「Their presence is getting further away… They had seemed to have made a temporary retreat.」

Yatori peeked out the window. After learning that they got through the first trial, the two of them exhaled in relief— it was just a few minutes, but the fight was more intense than they imagined.

It was a trap. Looking at the two packmates that were shot, the leader ground his teeth.

He launched the assault knowing the risk, so he had braced himself for a retaliation. However, their opponent's methods was more tightly woven than expected. Building a wall inside the door, setting a trap to snare a wolf, and shooting at the packmates rescuing it— thinking back on the chain of events made it recognize again how cunning humans were.

But there were gaps too, he thought. The prey was distracted by the sound on the opposite wall, and he was just one step away from charging in. Right before he started charging, the two humans inside didn't realize his intent.

But during the run up to the jump, the red haired human reacted in time, and kicked the door close unhesitantly when she saw through his intent. He never thought that humans could move as swiftly as the wind. The thought humans were creatures that made up for their clumsiness by being cunning.

The prey was tougher than he expected, he had no choice but to acknowledge this fact. And with that, he had to make a harsh decision. Should they give up on their target and search for other prey?

The packmate that was lightly wounded pulled the bolt out of its back, but another bolt was embedded deeply in the other wolf, which might be stuck there forever. Just like what happened to his elder brother. But even then, it would succumb to its injury if the wound reached its intestines.

Even if they took care of the prey, there might be more sacrifices. Would it be wiser to give up and look for other prey— As the leader's thoughts trend towards safety...

— Woof.

A weak bark reached his ears. He turned back, as if he was doused by cold water.

A wolf that was two sizes smaller than the other wolves stood together with another thin wolf. They were so thin that their ribs were showing.

They were his spouse and son that had just stopped the nursing phase. Right now, his family that was his priority was starving— as a male wolf, the thought of that filled him with scorching pain.

His son stumbled over with weak strides, and rubbed his nose against his father's front paw. The leader licked his face gently, and strongly refuted the decision he made earlier.

In this pack, this was the only cub that inherited his bloodline. The other cubs either died before maturing, or had left to lead their own pack. His spouse was old, and this was definitely his last son.

He had to let this cub survive, or else his bloodline will die out in this pack, and the next leader wouldn't be a descendant of him and his wife. The leader couldn't accept this result, that would be refuting his life's work.

He felt a gaze and turned to his wife. He saw in her eyes that she felt the same way.

The will of the two wolves spread to the entire pack, and they decided on their own fate.

「Do you think the wolves have given up?」

Ikuta swing his hammer to make emergency repairs to the damaged barrier, and asked the person beside him:

「From that fight, the opponent should realize we are prepared, and they will have to pay if they try to attack again. What happens next… will depend on how hungry the wolves are, and their personality.」

Yatori answered as she helped with the repairs. The boy grunted and hammered in a nail.

「'I look forward to you making a wise judgement', huh? The leader of the pack seems very smart.」

「That's exactly why we can't be careless. If they refuse to give up, who knows what they will do next—」

When the girl said these words of caution, their stomachs growled loudly in the cramped room.

「… That's right, I haven't eaten anything since noon.」

「Let's eat then, we don't have to starve together with them.」

They nodded at each other and took out provisions from their bags. Ikuta bit into spicy grilled meat wrap, and spoke as if he suddenly remembered something:

「… There are provisions in this cabin, so we have plenty of food. 」

「Are you thinking about using it for the next trap?」

「That works too… But I felt a little uneasy. Even after excluding our portions, there are enough food to feed the wolves.」

The boy looked at the food laid out by his feet. Yatori shook her head without hesitation:

「… Even if we share it with them, they would just get cocky, and think there are other food aside from us inside the cabin.」

「Yes, I know that. But— if we can communicate with our opponents, we can avoid bloodshed and reach a compromise.」

「I feel the same, but it is impossible to communicate with feral beasts. Besides, even for humans that speaks the same language, it will be difficult too. If they attack with wind guns or fire, we can't defend the cabin so easily, and have to brace ourselves to launch an attack.」

The vermillion haired girl who was completely calm stated the reality of the situation. Ikuta nodded in agreement:

「That’s true… In the end, intelligent or not, all starving animals will act in the same way.」

「Even in a war between humans, they will only talk when both sides had exhausted their ammunition. My father always says that this order can never be reversed.」

Accepting her opinion with a grim heart, the boy lifts his head and looked out the window:

「So this battle will continue until we break the wolves’ fangs, right?」

「The other ending will be when we’ve used up all our energy.」

Yatori answered forthrightly. When he heard that, Ikuta took a big bite from the food in his hand, chewed the meat and wrappings, and swallowed. His throat made a very loud gulping sound.

「That’s the only ending I want to avoid— it can’t be helped, let’s break their fangs.」

When the eastern skies started turning white a while after 5 am, the beasts saw the light in the cabin go out, and the front door opened with a creak.

After exchanging looks with his packmates, the leader lying prone stood up. None of his packmate would charge in recklessly now. With the lesson of the previous failure on their mind, the pack left one young cub behind and approached the cabin cautiously.

As the small creature had stopped emitting light, there was no way to see inside the cabin through the windows. Even if they peered in through the door, there was nothing but pitch darkness. The wolf pack closed in as much as possible while keeping themselves hidden, but couldn’t hear anything.

And of course, they didn’t think the two humans had fallen asleep. As the silence and darkness loomed, the scent of danger turned

thicker. Despite feeling his hair standing on end, the leader made the decision to tighten the encirclement with his pack.

They left two wolves at the entrance, sent two others to the back of the cabin, while the leader and spouse stayed in a spot that could see both sides. Spreading their forces were similar to last time, and the success this method yielded in previous hunts was the reason for their confidence.

They will win if one wolf infiltrated into the cabin. The leader was sure of that, according to his experience, the human's tools— arrows and steel tube were a threat from a distance, and was not a threat when used within their fang's attacking range. If they crush their ankle and drag the human down, they could bite into their tender necks. Furthermore, the prey this time were human cubs.

Maybe the frightened preys planned to escape when the wolves went in, but that was fine too. The open plains were their territory, and taking care of two slow humans in a place without cover wouldn't take long.

As the leader imagined his path to victory, in the next instant, he saw a bolt hit the forehead of a packmate.

—!

The first casualty was one of the two wolves that went to the back of the cabin. Its limbs lost the strength to support itself, and its thin body keeled over limbly to the ground.

When it saw a packmate breath its last, even the extreme hunger disappeared from the mind of the leader. He howled from the bottom of his lungs— the final battle between man and beast erupted at this moment.

「— Head shot, one dead!」

「Got it. Five left!」

Their tense voices reverberated in the dim cabin. The bolt fired through a hole in the wall shot a wolf dead.

They stopped the lantern light of the Luminous sprite at dawn, plunging the cabin into darkness while the outside got brighter, reversing the situation from before. The wolves couldn't see the inside of the cabin, while Ikuta and Yatori had a clear view of the outside. This was the best condition to snipe at the enemy.

「Another wolf is approaching the wall. I'm loading the crossbow, what about the two in the front?」

「They are not coming in! The one with a bolt on its back is sprinting at the wall… Uwah!」

Bang! The entire cabin shook from the impact. Ikuta who fell on his butt stood up quickly:

「It's ramming the wall! It wants to break in with brute force!」

The boy reported as he checked the situation through the peephole. And as he expected, the wolf that rammed into the wall was entangled by a heap of fishing line and hooks, and couldn't get away from the wall. The trapped beast groaned in pain.

That was a trap he set during the night, judging that the wolves would attack the thin part of the wall. Ikuta grunted at the sight of his trap working, then picked up the weapon he made by tying a rusty knife to a stick— a makeshift spear.

「I already expected that…!」

He thrust the spear through the peephole, and stick it into the wolf by rough feel. He missed many attempts, but during his upteenth try, he felt a hit. The sensation of a spasming body could be felt from the spear handle gripped tightly in his hands, and a deafening howl came from the other side of the wall.

「… Bleh…!」

A nauseous feeling came up to his throat, but Ikuta suppressed it… He had seen chickens and goats being slaughtered at base, and had tried it himself. However, this was an entirely different experience.

「… After becoming a soldier… Do you have to do this often?」

The boy couldn't help saying that to the back of the girl. Killing in order to survive, and killing each other in a fight— he felt the key difference between these two types of killing.

「Second shot, missed! Nine bolts left! — what did you say?」

「… Nothing! I took out one, there's four left!」

He cast aside his sentimental feelings, and pushed his makeshift spear harder. The tip of the spear pierced through the wolf and struck deep into the ground. Ikuta then tied the spear shaft to a pillar with a rope, condemning the pitiful wolf to die in that position.

When they witnessed the second wolf fall into the trap, the leader and his spouse sprinted over.

They couldn't stand the sight of a packmate getting hurt and is rushing to its rescue— that wasn't the reason they were running. Seeing that the prey were distracted by attacks from the front and back, they were aiming to charge in. That was the only reason why they were standing by from a distant.

His spouse reached the cabin first, and pressed onto the wall with her paws. The leader didn't stop, and used his spouse as a stepping board. Just like last night, he leapt with all his might.

Working together with his longtime spouse, he jumped further and higher than his previous attempt. After sailing through the air, he reached out his paws and clinged to the edge of the roof. He then climbed up, and stood splendidly on top of the cabin.

Right after finishing his acrobatics, he immediately started working on the straw roof. After finding a spot that was seriously damaged, the leader stuck his nose through the gap between the straws— During last night's battle, when he caught a glimpse of the cabin's roof through the door, he realized that the roof was weaker than the walls.

The resistance on his snout was suddenly gone— and he felt a chill on his back. He backed away on reflex, and a bolt flew past the spot his head was in just a moment ago.

「Wolf on the roof! Watch out above!」

Yatori warned with her crossbow aimed at the ceiling. After getting the Luminous sprite on the table to emit lantern light, visibility was restored in the cabin. Ikuta open his eyes wide in surprise:

「Impossible! That's not a height that an animal can jump!」

「It's probably something pulled off by the pack leader. It did the same acrobatics last night! —Ikuta, take the crossbow!」

After shoving the crossbow to the boy, Yatori put her hands on the blades by her waist. Ikuta loaded the crossbow swiftly while the vermillion haired girl glared at the ceiling.

「Incoming—!」

Right after shoving its head through the straws, a large wolf jumped right into the cabin, pouncing towards Ikuta before landing on the ground.

「Hee—!」

Yatori pushed the boy down immediately, avoiding the wolf's fangs by a hair. She pulled out the blades by her waist, and faced the howling wolf.

「Stand up and don't move. If you leave my back… You will probably die.」

「… Yes, got it.」

From the moment he faced the vermillion haired girl from close up, the leader understood— she was strong. She had sharp fangs, even though she was human.

This wasn't referring to the saber and short sword in his opponent's hands, but something more fundamental. The leader could see immense prowess within her petite body.

He would be defeated if he challenged her recklessly. He might be a beast that didn't understand the concept of martial arts, but the leader was very certain of that. The girl before him showed no openings, which was the reason behind this conviction.

The cramped cabin was disadvantageous for him. When facing such a powerful foe, using his agile movement to toy with the enemy before attacking was the right path to take. However, he couldn't run freely in this confined space. The girl couldn't attack freely either, even though they were closing the gap slowly, they were still glaring at each other for now. But that didn't faze the leader, he knew time was on his side.

The sound of wood cracking came from the front and back walls. His surviving packmates were trying to break in.

Since the two humans were trapped here, they would accomplish that in short order. With victory within his grasp, the leader swore in his heart— I will tear you to pieces. Only your blood and warm intestines can quench my hunger.

As he waited eagerly for his packmates to charge in, he saw from the corner of his eyes— that the boy behind the girl tugged on a rope hanging from the ceiling.

—?

In that moment, a beam dropped from the ceiling. The leader backdash in time and avoid being hit, and the two humans used this chance to escape.

They ran to a large table leaning against the wall, with the sides and top covered in planks. This was an emergency refuge for a situation like this. The two humans charged into the sole entrance, and blocked it from the inside.

The leader caught up a step later, but the two of them seemed to be bracing the cover with a pole, so it wasn't that easy to break through. He was surprised by the stubborn resistance of his prey, but

the leader still backed away calmly, and waited for his packmates to join him.

「… F-Fortunately, we are prepared.」

In the cramped darkness, Ikuta said as he patted his thumping heart:

「To think we got forced to the brink by animals… Does the wolf leader understand human speech? He must be that smart. Maybe the professor will want to catch him as a specimen.」

「You tend to talk a lot when you are out of options.」

「I hope you can refrain from pointing out my issues calmly. It will make me cry.」

「Sigh, I can empathize with you. To be honest, I'm scared too.」

The girl shared her honest feelings as she traced her fingers over the plank beside her hand.

「There is only one plan left… If that fails, it's all over.」

「What we need to do is simple, but needs a lot of courage…」

「Is now the right time to write a will?」

「There's no pen or paper though. Besides, I won't die. Even if I did, I will visit my mom as a ghost, there's no need for wills.」

「Your answer is a little weak though. And you included unscientific contents in there too.」

「The bonds between my mother and I will definitely trump the logic of science. Q.E.D.」

The boy sudden change in tone made Yatori smile— she then made a steel-like resolution in her heart.

「… Don't worry. I will get you back safely, even if it cost me my life. I'm an Igsem descendant after all. If I have the resolve to sacrifice my life, I can take out four wolves.」

She told the boy with the unwavering conviction of a member of the nation’s guardian clan. But Ikuta looked at the girl with an incredibly gloomy face after hearing that:

「— What’s with that, suicide attacks? That wasn’t in the plan.」

「I mean as a very last resort, when everything else fails. Instead of both of us dying, having one of us live will be better. You understand that, right?」

Yatori said with a cautionary tone. That made the boy mad, and he raised his voice agitatedly:

「—No! The goal if for the both of us to return safely, any other result will be equally bad! Don’t you even understand something this simple? Then you are an idiot! The idiots of all idiots! Stupid Yatori! Stupid~ Stupid〜!」

「What—! You are the stupid one! Isn’t this the harsh decision necessary to keep our losses to the minimum!」

「Hah! Saying that you will sacrifice yourself to solve the problem isn’t a harsh decision, but just brushing the problem aside! And don’t act like my guardian! You are the same age as me!」

「You are the kid acting spoiled! Just what did you learn from all the missions we did!?」

「Do I even have to say it!? The one thing I learned from the missions given by Dad—」

Ikuta groped in the dark and grabbed the shoulders of the girl in the cramped space, and said the next line sincerely:

「— If we work together, we can overcome anything, isn’t that so!?」

His strong declaration made the vermillion girl fall silent. Without relaxing his grip on her shoulders, the boy continued talking agitatedly:

「Promise me, Yatori. No matter how dire the situation, don't try to fight alone. There's only the two of us here, if we want to survive, we can't split our forces.」

「……」

「To be frank, wolf packs are hard to deal with, and we can't win if we split up. So we have to challenge it as a team, and be two in one. Just like our left hand and right hand, left and right leg, left and right brain— we are not separate individuals, but one entity moving as one.」

He said as he reached out his palm and place it against her palm, as if he was saying how important this bond was.

「So it is impossible to sacrifice one to save the other. Do you understand?」

Yatori couldn't offer any rebuttal.

When she came to, she realized how much she yearned for this— to be like this. To believe in his words and fight towards victory. When such thoughts flashed across her mind, the vermillion haired girl had already accepted the possibility raised by the boy.

「… Since you have said that much, then you should show the results to match.」

「That's only natural. You just need to always act under the presumption that me, your left hand, will be moving in concert with you.」

Ikuta nodded confidently. His gleeful tone made Yatori give a deep sigh.

「… I apologize for acting like a guardian. Thinking back, you and I had always been equals.」

This is the first time I felt this way in my life— the vermillion haired girl added, and she smiled boldly in response to the boy before her.

「If I'm the right hand, then the left hand has to match me too.」

「Leave it to me. You can think of me as the dominant hand if you want to.」

They couldn't see each other face, but they knew what expression the other was making. Sweeping aside all her meek feelings, Yatorishino Igsem made a resolve that was different from a few minutes ago:

「Then both hands will be working together— indeed, I don't feel like I will lose at all.」

After breaking the wall at the back of the cabin, the wolves outside came in.

They were initially confused by the absence of their prey, but was relieved when they learned the leader had chased the prey into the box in front of them, and started exploring the cabin. They search for the scent of food, and quickly found some jerky, and yelped in joy.

When they were about to dig in, but the leader barked at them for being careless— sniff carefully before eating! At that warning, the young pack mates quickly stuck their nose onto the jerky. Their instinct helped them to determine whether something was food by their scent, but the poison used by humans might not have a distinct smell. With that in mind, the leader demanded his pack mates to exercise caution.

After sniffing thoroughly and not finding anything amiss— the packmates reported with their eyes, and the leader finally gave permission. At that moment, the wolves started tearing into the jerky. Even with his back to the wolves eating with reckless abandon, the leader was unfazed. Unlike his packmates, the leader won't rest easy before killing the prey hiding in the box before him.

There were voices from the box all this time, but that had suddenly ceased. The two of them might be unexpectedly tough, but maybe they had given in to fate— just when the leader was thinking that, there was some noise from outside the cabin.

—?

When he turned back in surprise, the hole at the back of the cabin was blocked by planks. How was that possible, the two humans were in the box— despite falling into confusion, the leader rammed the planks before the other wolves could react.

He charged with all his might, but the planks wouldn't budge. This was only natural, as the wolves destroyed the torn back of the wall and dug at the earth, the hole was very close to the ground. The humans outside could use their entire body to barricade the planks, but the wolves inside couldn't bring their entire force to bear because of the awkward positioning, and could only nudge with their head and paws. As they could only push at the bottom part of the planks, most of their force was transferred to the ground.

They were trapped in the cabin— when the leader realized that, there were movement behind him. Even the front of the cabin, where the wolves had dug a hole halfway, had been barricaded by the humans with planks from the outside.

There were at least two humans outside. What was going on? Did they have reinforcements? As he was beset by confusion, the leader remembered something, ran to the box by the wall and put his ears onto it.

There was no sound, not even breathing. After confirming that he understood the situation— the humans had ran outside by breaking through the wall, and they made full use of the wolves' assumption that the humans were still inside. There wasn't any sound of the planks being cut, which meant they prepared this escape route last night.

And now, their positions had been swapped, with the four wolves trapped inside. The humiliation made him bark in frustration, but the leader still tried to think calmly— what was the prey's goal in trapping them inside? What will happen next?

A few seconds later, crimson petals of flame fell before the leader.

「Commencing fire attack!」

After throwing a flaming rag onto the roof, Yatori used her entire body to press the planks against the cabin as she shouted. On the other side of the cabin, Ikuta was also using his body to blockade the hole in the wall.

As the burning smell entered their nasal cavity, the two of them looked up with a gulp. The small ball of fire they threw onto the straw roof that was dry from the drought— had grown into an inferno at a scary pace.

A few minutes later, the roof started to collapse, and the wolves started to howl. With no exit out of the cabin and plenty of fuel for the fire inside, even the dullest of wolf could imagine how this torturous event would develop.

Ikuta and Yatori could feel the crazed movements of the beast inside the cabin. They were scratching at the wall and pacing around futilely— the two young wolves had probably lost the calm of mind to follow the decision of the leader. Their hysteric cries echoed loudly, and was clear to anyone listening that it was howls of pain.

「Executing attack—」

However, that was just the beginning of the tragedy. Sensing that the chaos inside the cabin had reached its peak, Yatori removed the plank. There was only one ventilation hole in this scorching hell— but the wolves had lost their cool to suspect this was a trap, and rushed to the opening.

A young wolf that happened to be close by reached there first, but the hole was barely large enough for one wolf to go through. As it push aside its packmate and burrowed through the hole...

「Hee—!」

The girl stabbed her saber into the defenceless forehead. It pierce right through the brain, and killed the wolf without giving it any chance to pull away.

「Three left!」 She reported loudly.

Seeing their packmate breath its last in the hole, the wolves behind stopped. Since they saw the fate of the wolf that attempted to burrow out, they couldn't follow.

Howl! The wolf retreating slowly from the hole cried out loudly. Its hind leg was shot by a bolt, fired by Ikuta through a peephole from the front of the cabin.

「Alright, I shot one…!」

Pressing his back onto the plank again, the boy started pulling the crossbow string— since they couldn't hope for the wolves to retreat, their only chance to survive was to wipe out the wolves. Fighting with that in mind, the two acted mercilessly.

Shortly after that, the cabin became smokey, and the two couldn't see inside. As the heat was too intense, it became difficult to even block the planks. They exercised caution and pulled about a metre away, and waited for the wolves.

「……」 「—」

But no matter how long they waited, the wolves showed no sign of escaping the cabin. Maybe they got suffocated by the smoke, Ikuta thought. The fire spread from the roof to the walls, and it was just a matter of time before the cabin collapses. The inside was already a sea of flame.

When the two of them thought that the battle was over— the sudden shattering noise assaulted their ear drums.

「「……?」」

It wasn't from the front or back of the cabin where Ikuta and Yatori were keeping watch, but from the perspective of the front, it was to

the right of the building. The two of them rushed over to check, and found the leader and another wolf had smashed through the wall.

There were scorched patches of fur all over the two wolves, which was a shock— the two wolves didn't run towards the fake entrance they prepared despite the desperate situation. They waited for the building to grow weaker with the fire, waiting for their chance in the intense heat and thick smoke. They charge at the weakest part of the cabin at the right moment, and survived splendidly.

They glared at the human children with hatred. Feeling goosebumps on their backs from that killing intent, the vermillion haired girl and dark haired boy raised their weapons.

How dare you— the leader who escaped burning hell at the very last moment glared at his enemy with furious eyes, and cast his attention to the back of the cabin.

The other packmate— didn't follow behind. It had probably inhaled too much smoke from running around aimlessly, and was beyond help now. The regret of not saving his packmate made the leader tremble and growl.

Four of his pack has died so far, only leaving him and his spouse. There was nothing more terrible than that. No— he realized the silver lining in this situation. The perpetrators was right before him.

Their motivation for killing had evolved beyond just filling their bellies, and became more pure in their intent— and the wolves didn't even let off any intimidating howl before hunting their own prey.

「Uwah…!」

His spouse swiftly chased the dark haired human. As he watched his wife from the corner of his eye, the leader faced off against the red haired human and remained still. Since he couldn't turn his back on this formidable foe, the couple divided their work right from the start.

The girl took a stance with both blades pointed at her foe. To avoid the blades and sink his fangs into his opponent's neck, the leader pushed off the ground hard.

「Hah! Hah…! Good, it's chasing me…!」

The boy running with the crossbow was being pursued by a wolf. Feeling the intense murderous pressure behind him, Ikuta took out a walnut sized object and put it into his mouth, then charged to the back of the burning cabin.

This was too meek of a resistance to shake the wolf off. The speed of the human child and adult wolf was too different, and as expected, the distanced was closed in just 10 m.

「… Uwah!」

As the boy felt the breathing of the wolf close in behind, he turned back— and saw the wolf pounced on him, pushing him down with its paws. A human child was too powerless against this feral agility and strength.

The wolf looked down at Ikuta with murderous eyes, and slowly opened its jaw. It will take revenge for its fallen comrades with this bite— but one moment before that, the boy crushed the container in his mouth, and spit it at the wolf's nose.

「Guu?」

The wolf that subdued the boy backed away, as if it was struck heavily on the nose by the boy. Using this chance, Ikuta who was also coughing from the agitating content stood up slowly. What he blew out was spice powder. For wolves that had sensitive nose, this attack was super effective.

「Cough, cough…! I-I'm really out of options now…!」

He only bought himself a few short seconds. Ikuta didn't miss this chance, and ran away after picking up his weapon. After going to the back of the cabin, he ran counter clockwise to the other side of the building.

He turned around at the corner, and aimed his crossbow at the enemy to hold it back. The wolf backed away to avoid being shot, and the few seconds from this was enough for him to make one lap around the cabin and back to the starting point.

「Combine forces, Yatori—!」

Ikuta shouted to the vermillion haired girl who was facing off against the leader.

When it heard the boy's shout from behind that reverberated loudly, the leader felt his heart froze for a moment.

Why is he back!? If he is fine, what about my spouse? D-Did she—!

「Hee—!」

The girl didn't miss this opening created by the leader's wavering, and attacked. The leader reacted a moment slower because he was distracted by his worries of his wife— and that decided his fate.

As he twisted to dodge the slash, he felt a searing pain in the joints of his right front paw, and lost his balance— before he found out why, the vermillion haired girl had ran past him.

——!

The leader turned around in surprise, and found the two of them standing back to back, as if they had planned this ahead of time. When he saw this scene, his chest was filled with utter despair. His spouse who returned a step later also stopped because of the enemy's intimidating aura.

Overwhelmed by the two human's indomitable spirits, the leader looked down hesitantly at his body— his right leg was now a stump. He had lost one of his legs to support his body weight. Blood kept pouring from the wound and dyed the ground red.

His face was scowling from pain, and the leader turned his gaze back to the vermillion haired girl and dark haired boy who stood together… No, maybe they had been standing together from the very

start. Ironically, the leader learned the reason why his front paw was sliced off.

Compared to him and his spouse who split up to fight, the two humans appeared at a glance, but was actually working together at a fundamental level. When the boy was chased by his spouse, the vermillion haired girl was certain her other half will return, and waited for him.

No— the leader corrected himself. Thinking back, the boy wasn't running away in the first place. By running a lap around the cabin and leaving his spouse behind, there would be a two on one situation momentarily. The boy acted for this sake, and the girl waited after noticing his intent. That must be so.

The leader couldn't pull off the same thing. When the boy who he thought had ran away returned, he was worried about his wife for an instant. He didn't trust and waited for her, but wanted to rush to her side instead. In the face of a formidable foe, he made the foolish mistake of losing his focus.

The vermillion haired girl didn't miss that opening and took his leg. The injury made it difficult for him to even stand, so his agility was gone— but this wound wasn't the critical blow. His fighting spirit had been daunted on a different level.

They who trusted in their other half, and him who couldn't put in his complete faith. The strong bonds of the two humans plunged the leader into despair. He had to admit that their relationship was stronger than he and his spouse.

— We can't win this fight against this pair.

The moment he admitted his lost, the leader couldn't go on, and his eyes lost their light.

Ikuta successfully linked up with Yatori after running a lap around the cabin, and faced off against the two wolves again. Something neither party expected intruded on the battle.

—Woof!

It was a wolf cub. It had just stopped nursing, and was as large as a mid sized dog. It probably ran here after noticing that its parents were in danger. The boy and girl frowned at the sight of the cub barking at them with a shrill voice.

「… Is that reinforcements?」

「… If I fought with it on my own, I might lose.」

Ignoring the two who wasn't sure how to judge this development, the leader staggered unsteadily to the cub on his three legs. He stood in front of his cub, gestured to his spouse with a gaze, and looked towards the two human again.

「——」

Yatori and the leader looked at each other for a few seconds—sensing the intent in his eyes, the girl put down her blades with a sigh.

「It's over.」

「Huh?」

Before Ikuta could start feeling stumped, the leader threw his head to the sky and howled. With that as the signal, several wolves turned at the same time.

The female wolf leaned in close to the right of her spouse, who had lost a leg. A cub snuggled the left chest of the leader. The three wolves supported each other and headed west.

— Awooo.

The howl of the leader spread far and wide in the morning of this temperate climate. Ikuta and Yatori silently watched them went over the hill. The two of them stood shoulder to shoulder and kept watching and watching—

「Great, you two are safe.」

Yatori hugged the Water sprite and Luminous sprite that had walked over on their stubby legs, and breathe a sigh of relief. Before setting fire to the cabin, the sprites had already escaped outside through an exit they prepared ahead of time. Their 「Soul stone」 could withstand very high temperature, but whether the sprites body would remain safe was a different issue.

「Sigh～ I already knew, but it can't be salvage.」

Ikuta shrugged in front of the burning cabin. After consuming all the flammable and rotten materials in the cabin, the fire was incredibly intense. Without water or any tools, the two children couldn't do anything about it. Yatori nodded slightly beside him.

「We were forced by the circumstances, but we burned down a military facility… How can we apologize to General Bada and the scientists?」

「Both you and I are safe, so there is nothing to apologize for. This cabin is falling apart anyway, so it's a good chance to rebuild it.」

The boy said firmly without any guilt, and turned to the horizon in the early dawn.

「— Okay. I think Bajin-nii and the others saw the smoke, and will be here to get us soon.」

Ikuta said as he searched his pockets. He fished out a piece of jerky, tore it in half, then passed a piece to Yatori.

「Here, take half of this. The rest got burned, so this is the last piece. Savour it.」

The girl took the jerky, and the two of them sat down back to back, and bit into the jerky.

「… What will happen to those wolves?」

「Their pack is almost wiped out. The leader is seriously wounded, so their future is grim.」

Ikuta expressed his views frankly, and Yatori listened as she stared at the jerky in her hand.

「This feels like we are eating their flesh.」

「Yes, I'm thinking the same too.」

After saying that, the boy chewed the jerky in his mouth carefully and swallowed it.

「Hey, Yatori. Since you think that way, then you can choose another path aside from the military.」

「……」

「You don't have to rush an answer, take your time. It's fine to just remember what I said today too. Since it's paired with such a tense memory, you won't ever forget it, right?」

Ikuta said with a smile as he glanced at the flaming cabin. The way he put it was too funny, and the vermillion haired girl curled up her lips as she surveyed the area:

「Indeed, I will never forget this—」

After that, they met up with the scientists who hurried over after seeing the smoke, and told them what happened, as they looked at the ruins of the burned cabin. The exploits of the children surprised Bajin, Nazuna and the others. As the equipment they needed to stay here had gone up in flames, they returned to base without carrying out the environmental studies they had planned.

The scientists felt guilty about endangering the children because of their carelessness, and Bada also said 「I didn't think this through carefully」, and reproached himself for his lack of thought. For a long while after that, they put a lot of thought into drawing the line between letting the children roam freely and being irresponsible.

However, the apologies from the adults vexed Ikuta and Yatori. Surviving the desperate situation by their own means was a badge they wore proudly. 「Instead of being sorry, you should compliment

us instead.」 Ikuta said it forwardly, and Yatori expressed similar sentiments on her face.

In the end, the wolf attack became the climax of Yatori's exchange study. The rest of the days passed by without any major events, and her three month stay here came to an end. After everyone held a farewell party with all sorts of talent performance, the vermillion haired girl bid farewell to the group.

「I will be going home today. Thank you for taking care of me during my stay.」

The morning sun shone into the house from the eastern window. In the commandant's office, Yatori stood at attention and said to the master of the room. Bada showed a surprised face, and turned his face from the canvas to the girl:

「Go home…? Isn't Yatori-chan a kid from our house?」

「If I stay any longer, I will probably think that way too, so I have to return before that happens.」

Yatori was used to his antics of pretending to be retarded, and answered easily. Bada stared at her, and let out a big sigh.

「What a pity～… Just when you are getting more rounded and flexible.」

He muttered with sincere regret. The vermillion haired girl smiled back, and cast her gaze at the canvas before Bada:

「Is drawing your hobby?」

「Just an amateurish hobby. I thought I could finish before today, but unfortunately, the time is up.」

He said as he laid his drawing instrument on the table. It was a drawing of four people standing together, but it wasn't clear who they were at this stage. There were still much to be done before the work was complete.

Yatori shifts her eyes from the canvas to Bada, and said after some hesitation:

「Can I ask you something? Uncle Bada, what do you hope to achieve from this exchange study?」

「Hmm? To turn Sol's daughter into a bad girl of course, and make him dumbstruck when he sees you return. However, you are a better kid than I imagined, and this proved more difficult than expected. My scheme is only half way done after three months.」

Bada shrugged with a sigh. The vermillion haired girl looked right into his dark eyes and continued asking:

「Uncle— you realized Ikuta's talent, right?」

「Having a cocky son is really troubling. Being so smart at such a young age is a problem too.」

「Don't you want to raise him as a soldier and follow in your footsteps?」

She asked the key question. When he heard that, Bada tilted his head in surprise:

「But why? There is no need for him to step intentionally into that world, there are plenty of fun way to live too, right? Be it a scientist or an adventurer, that child can just do what he wishes. That applies to you too, Yatori-chan.」

As he alternates his gaze between the pen and the canvas, that man curled his lips self mockingly.

「I didn't choose the thug life, the thug life chose me. I wanted to spend my life holding a brush, but when I realized it, I was holding a weapon instead... Since you are going to live your life, why let your heritage constrain you? Just seek the goal your heart desires without being bound by all that, and spend your time with those dear to you— no matter what awaits you in the end, I think that is the best path to take.」

For him who didn’t have the freedom to pursue his passion freely, this was his answer. With a smile as bright as the sun, Bada Sankrei gave light to the girl before him.

「Remember this, Yatori-chan. This is the only thing I won’t back down from.

— All children have the right to dream.」

When she left the building, she ran into a lady about to walk in. She had dark silky hair, pale translucent skin and a gentle gleam in her eyes. There was no way she could mistake her for anyone else.

「Aunt Yuka.」

The girl called out to her intimately. Seeing that she had packed her bags, the mother of the Sankrei house lowered her lonely gaze.

「Yatori— you are, really going?」

「… Yes. Thank you for taking care of me all this while—」

Yuka bent down and embraced the girl tightly, not letting her finish:

「I don’t… want you to go. You are the daughter of my house. You are already… a kid from our house.」

Yuka whispered into the girl’s ears, and tightened her embrace. The girl accepted the hug with her eyes closed, and said quietly:

「— Aunt Yuka, I think you already know. I don’t remember my mother’s face.」

「……」

「She died shortly after my birth— before I was two. Even though she was healthy in the past, there are times when a mother’s health deteriorates after giving birth. I was then raised by my father. I have a nanny, but because of my father’s education directive, she didn’t play the role of a mother. Thinking back— I didn’t know what a mother was like.」

Her smooth long hair brushed against the girl's cheeks. The faint sweet scent made her feel nostalgic for a home that wasn't hers.

「I learned what is a mother in this exchange study… Warm, gentle, and a kindness that encompasses all. A woman who is just like a sun, that makes me want to stay with her forever.」

The warmth from the embrace probably thawed her heart, and Yatori made her first and final wilful request:

「I have a request. Can you— pat my head?」

The mother fulfilled the girl's tiny request with a smile. Her slender and soft fingers caressed the girl's head, neck and cheeks, and the vermillion haired girl kept the memories of this sensation deep within her heart.

「Thank you, Aunt Yuka. I will remember… this warmth.」

They parted from their long embrace, and then hugged each other again.

Yatori walked to the eastern end of the base, and found the rainbow making arc gate there. It was built to welcome her, but everyone decided to keep it as a local attraction. Thinking back on the innocent smile of the scientists clad in white, she walked forth with the corners of her lips raised.

「I know you are there.」

The girl announced, and Ikuta walked out of the shadows of the arc gate with a sigh.

「I don't think there is any need for farewells. We will be seeing each other again, right?」

「There's no telling when I can visit again, I'm very busy.」

「That won't matter. Like I said, we are two in one.」

The boy said confidently without any hint of loneliness. Accepting that happily, Yatori looked back at him with the same expression:

「When we meet next time, I don’t want to see you turn skinnier than this.」

「Don’t look down on me, I won’t disappoint you.」

Ikuta said with his chest held high, and raised his right hand. Yatori mimicked his action, and the both of them moved their arms at the same time. Their palms clapped together with a crisp sound, then separated.

「I will look forward to it— see you later, Ikuta.」

「Look forward to it— til next time, Yatori.」

Without saying anything more, the two of them shared the will to meet again, and went their separate ways.

After the exchange study ended, a few months after Yatori returned to the Igsem house.

The girl who spent everyday with a busy schedule received a news.

「— Huh?」

One day after morning practice, the father told his daughter.

The Imperial General Bada Sankrei will be executed as a war criminal for deploying his unit in defiance of an imperial edict––

「How is that possible…」

This must be a mistake, that was Yatori’s initial thought. However, with no regard for her confusion, the situation continued to deteriorate like a boulder rolling downhill.

Before the trial even ended, Bada died in prison, his death shrouded in mystery. The details of his death wasn’t made public, and the Rising Sun Regiment that lost their leader crumbled apart— during the same time, the two other Sankrei went missing.

「— Why—」

No matter how anxious she was, how much she wanted to save that mother and child, the girl couldn’t do it.

In the torrent of layers of mysteries, Yatori was tormented by her harsh questions.

「— Why? Father—!」

Even when she asked hundreds and thousands of times, the answer was steel-like silence.

The one who apprehended the traitor Bada was her father, Solvenares Igsem.

Chapter 3: Parting Forever



When he opened his eyes, the world seems exceptionally clear. Just that was enough for Ikuta to feel the effect of a good rest, and he sat up on his bed.

「… Mmmm…」

He looked to the side, and a blonde girl was breathing evenly. Her peaceful sleeping face made the youth raise the corners of his lips as he picked up the pocket watch beside his pillow— It was 7 am in the morning. He slept at 3 pm in the afternoon, it had not been an entire day, but he rested for 16 hours.

「… Good.」

Ikuta lightly tapped his cheeks to wake himself up completely, got off the bed and put on the shirt he left on the chair. He kept his partner Kusu into his pouch, and after hesitating for a moment, called out to the Princess.

「Princess, princess, it's morning.」

「… Hmm… Hmm?」

She slowly opened her eyelids, and her sleepy eyes took quite some time to focus.

She looked first at the dark haired youth, then the tent's ceiling, then the bed, and her pyjamas. The Princess then backed away from the bed with a flushed face— and fell off the bed.

「Uwah…!」

「Hey, are you fine? Are you the type who is clumsy when you just wake up?」

Ikuta reached out to her with a smile. Princess Chamille who was pulled up by her stood quietly with her face red.

「After getting a good rest, I have to return to my post. What about you, Princess? We won't be moving our forces yet, so you can sleep a while longer.」

「… I'm getting up. It feels like I have been sleeping for a long time, what time is it now?」

「It's 7 am in the morning. Both of us slept for a long time.」

The youth answered as he put his hands on his hips and leaned backwards. The Princess was reminded of the vermillion haired girl as she watched him.

「… I wonder if Yatori slept well?」

「Probably not as well as I did. After Yorunzaf Igsem got injured, the burden is all resting on her.」

Ikuta answered without mincing his words. Before the girl could get depressed, he patted her back.

「Here, get changed and let's go. It's about time to end this retarded civil war.」

Learning from his past mistakes, Ikuta decided to face the enemy alone. Leaving Princess Chamille to his comrades in the Knight Corp, he picked six escorts and ventured into the dark basement again.

「Sorry for the wait, fox.」

When Ikuta spoke, Trisnai showed his usual mask-like smile. He had not seen the sun for many days, but he didn't seem to have gotten weaker at all.

「Oh, it's just you today? What about the Third Princess?」

「I don't plan to bring her with me again. There are people emitting toxins harmful to children here.」

「Fufu, really now… But did you forget that this is a Royal Conference? The meeting can't progress without the royals, and it will just be a fruitless meeting.」

「Say what you want. Being led around by the nose is the most fruitless result. So this is fine. All that talk about Royal Conference is just something you made up.」

Discarding the progress on their previous discussion, the youth looked down at the fox before him coldly:

「I won't be bothered by your nonsense with the line of succession. I have no reason to discuss this here. What I need is the key to ending this coup— simply put, that will be you and the Emperor. It's not necessary to discuss the line of succession since the Emperor is right here.」

「Please reconsider carefully. As you can see, His Majesty's health is ailing, and he might pass on at any moment. If the Royal Conference doesn't reach a conclusion before that, then the crown will be passed down to the first in the line of succession, which is the First Prince. Your faction only has the Third Princess, are you sure you want to let the victory slip away to the other forces?」

「Really? The only thing I'm certain of, is that you can't pull the trigger yourself. Since you are using your position as the imperial Chancellor and Archbishop to convince the personal sprite, the Emperor's existence is key to your safety. If the Emperor dies, it will impact your capacity to act on his behalf. Hence, it is impossible for you to kill the Emperor personally.」

「Killing His Majesty… You don't have to point that out, I don't have any intention of doing that. I'm sincerely concerned with the Emperor's illness. My hands are too frail to help with the sickness tormenting his body…」

「If he is really ill in the first place.」

After cutting off his opponent, the youth snorted.

「The Emperor's symptoms isn't from an illness, but the results of you drugging him over many long years, right.」

「Why are you making such baseless claims?」

「Because of how much of a schemer you are. It would be strange if the Emperor's illness isn't under your control. The great villainous

minister Trisnai Izanma won't use someone who might die at any moment as your lifeline. You have to keep the Emperor alive to protect yourself, isn't that so?」

「Hmm… It seems that I'm being trusted in a strange manner.」

「We can find out by diagnosing the Emperor's condition. I have some knowledge about symptoms of poisoning, and have a companion who graduated from nursing school. If it goes well, we might be able to identify the medicine that was used… How about it, Trisnai? Since you are innocent, will you agree to the diagnosis?」

「Don't even think about. No one other than the imperial doctor is qualified to touch His Majesty.」

The fox shrugged in an exaggerated manner. Ikuta yelled loudly as if he was trying to drown Trisnai out.

「Listen, personal Sprite! The one who caused the Emperor's health to deteriorate this much is Trisnai Izanma himself! He poisoned him and manipulated him like a puppet, and twist the governance of this country as he pleased! You can't save the citizens by protecting him! That will just result in more misfortune to befall on the people!」

When the personal sprite on the bed was called by name, it moved a little. Trisnai casually stood in front of the Sprite and shook his head with a smile still on his face:

「Please don't do that. The personal Sprite is equivalent to being a part of His Majesty's body, and I don't remember granting you permission to speak with him.」

「I'm really sorry, pardon my poor manners.」

Casting the etiquettes aside like a pebble on the road side, the youth continued nonchalantly. He didn't think it was so easy to convince the personal Sprite. He could tell from Trisnai's forceful behavior that the Sprite's thinking was incredibly clumsy and

forthright. It probably intentionally chose to keep its distance, under the pretext that there wasn't a common consensus on the correct answer in politics and ethics— Ikuta postulates the personal Sprite's condition to be like that.

「No matter what, it would take a lot of time to break through this defence, so I will take my time after the situation has stabilized. We will wait to link up with the Remeon faction. Even without an edict or Jewel Voice Broadcast, we are all set with you and the Emperor in our hands. Isn't that right, fox?」

Ikuta cast a strong gaze towards the fox's face. Trisnai answered with a mask-like smile still plastered on his face.

「Why are you so sure that the Remeon faction is coming here?」

「… What?」

「Let me put this another way. Why do you think the Remeon faction aren't here yet?」

The youth didn't answer. Overjoyed by this silence, the fox told him in a song like tone:

「The answer is simple. They have a traitor. One of the search teams had went around to the back and disrupted the supply and communication line. That's why they can't move freely.」

「You are talking as if you are seeing it with your own eyes. The Remeon faction staged the coup with grim resolve, why would there be a turncoat now? Even if that is true, why will you—」

Mid sentence in his refute, Ikuta's stiffened his lips. Trisnai noticed that Ikuta had noticed it, and deepened his smile:

「I already knew the stage was going to happen ahead of time. That's the answer.」

The truth was unveiled, and the youth clenched his fists:

「… The espionage team reporting directly to the Emperor…!?」

「So you know? That's right, they are the only forces I can deploy freely in secret. They might be small in numbers, but they are permitted to serve the Emperor directly. So I worked hard to expand and use this organization effectively. And the results… isn't that great, but they allowed me to learn more about the inside dealings of the Imperial army than normal people.」

Ikuta clicked his tongue. I sent a spy to infiltrate the army— That was the meaning behind the fox's words. But that wasn't strange, and within the youth's expectations. The problem was that he underestimated the scale of the personnel that was committed into this.

「Quite a number of them infiltrated the Remeon faction's search team, which had been planned by me a long time ago. The more a group took pride in their unity, the weaker they are too a traitor from within. The minimum standards I asked is for them to disrupt the backlines and delay the enemy forces— But I expect my unit to achieve even better results.」

「… To think you dragged so many people with you in your laughable scheme.」

「No matter what era it is, there are always fanatic believers in the royals. It's easy to train them into a formidable force. Telling them how great the Empire is, how majestic the Emperor is and how sacred the royal family is— just by telling them the good news and covering up the bad parts will be enough. By doing that for two years, then an excellent pro-royal fanatic will be ready.」

「When he staged the coup, General Remeon should have investigated his organization thoroughly. Did that many of your pro-royal fanatics escaped his surveillance checks?」

「I just need someone to join the checkers. But to play it safe, I offered up a few sacrifices. General Remeon thought the checks were completed with that, what an honest man.」

The fox laughed softly. Ikuta barely suppressed the urge to strangle him by the throat.

「Let me add that in the current situation where you arrive earlier than the other two factions, I only ordered my subordinates to disrupt the Remeon faction. I also sent spies to infiltrate the Igsem faction, but they aren't doing anything yet. Do you understand what I mean?」

There was no way that the youth missed that. Realizing that his opponent understood, Trisnai told him in a loud voice:

「That's right, the ones who will reach here isn't the Remeon faction's search team. The Igsem faction will reach faster than their counterpart that is being hobbled!」 Like an audience who was eager to see the opening of a show, Trisnai's face was bright. In contrast, Ikuta's attitude had fallen below freezing point, and asked in a low tone:

「... Do what? Even if the Igsem caught up, the fact remains that the Emperor is in our hands. This is just changing the order of negotiations.」

「That's right. I'm taking away your options.」

The fox turned to the personal Sprite on the bed after making his firm declaration:

「— Imperial Edict!」

「— Imperial Edict!」

The shout echoing everywhere stopped the soldiers in their tracks. The Igsem search team heading south towards the quarantine village were surprised by the current situation, and listened closely to the will of the Emperor coming from the mouths of the Sprites.

『— Acting on behalf of the Katjvarna Emperor, Arshankrut Kitra Katjvanmaninik, Chancellor Trisnai Izanma hereby make this announcement. Soldiers with the responsibility of being the official

army, if you hold any pride towards your duty, then punish the traitors in the south of the Dafuma Province, who are threatening me, the Emperor, in the secluded village. Purge the grave sinners who intend to infringe on the will of the royal throne.

Their impudence and lawlessness cannot be forgiven. Even if he uses me as a shield, you must protect the authority of the crown that had reigned for 900 years. I realized that my life will come to an end here. Hence from this day forth, you must serve my successor. I will entrust the throne to my child who inherits my blood, and my spirit will watch over my people by the side of God.』

The face vermillion haired girl commander in the center of the formation turned grim. The Jewel Voice Broadcast continued from her partner Shia.

『Those who defy this order shall be branded traitors. Submitting to the traitors is the acts of ungrateful and despicable people. If not, then purge the enemy. You don't have to worry about me, and bring your full might to bear to crush the traitors. You only need to know that this is the only true justice.

I repeat. Acting on behalf of the Katjvarna Emperor, Arshankrut Kitra Katjvanmaninik, Chancellor Trisnai Izanma hereby make this announcement.—』

「— You bastard…」

Ikuta trembled with rage, and Trisnai turned to him gleefully:

「I gave the Igsem faction the cause and the opportunity. If they subjugate you, they will be the official army, if not, they will be the traitor unit. Alright then, what will you do? — do you think they will agree to negotiate under such a situation?」

「… Stop kidding me. You keep amending the edicts to your own convenience, who will take them seriously? Telling us to purge the Igsem faction, and ordering them to subjugate us, it's clear that you want us to fight each other!」

「You will obviously ignore this, the Remeon faction will probably do the same. But it's different for the Igsem, they are a clan that has always obeyed the edicts. Just imagine— the Emperor who has been confined by rebel forces is ordering them to purge the rebels with no regard for his own life. That they should prioritize the sanctity of the throne over the emperor's life. This is an act befitting their lord. How can they claim to be loyal if they ignore this edict?!」

The fox declared without any hesitation. The youth shook his head stubbornly to refute this explanation.

「If they are sincere about protecting this nation, then the urgent task at hand is to unite all the forces together! Subjugating us will reduce the fighting forces available to us, and we will lose the means to fend off the invading Kioka army. Even the Igsem faction will understand that!」

「Then you thought wrong. First of all, you only brought about 3,000 men to the Dafuma Province. The main battle of the coup will be played out in central, so you have to leave your main forces there. So even if your entire forces get wiped out, that will just be 3,000 less soldiers, an acceptable sacrifice.」

「Don't be retarded! Both sides will suffer casualties in a battle, there is no guarantee that the losses will remain within acceptable range. And this time, not only will we lose the lives of soldiers, but time too. There isn't much time before the Kioka invades!」

「Both problems will be solved if they kill you quickly.」

Trisnai answered nonchalantly. Ikuta started to scowl.

「It is clear to everyone that the 『Rising Sun Regiment』 is only revived because you exist. Once you are dead, this regiment will lose many things. Strategic plans, fame, morale— and the reason to fight. If the Igsem demand the soldiers who lost everything to stand down, they will have no other choice but to accept— hence, killing you is the shortcut to victory」

「I won't just lay down and die! We have already shown our tenacity in the northern territory, if I have 3,000 men, I can hold out for months! The Igsem should know that too!」

「That's right— they know that very well. But if there is an outstanding commander who understands how you think, then it's possible to win the fight swiftly. Fortunately, the Igsem has the only person in the world who can accomplish this?」

The youth stopped breathing, as if this point that was raised had shot him through the chest. The fox continued mercilessly:

「In the near future, Yatorishino Igsem will be ordered by her father to use all forces available to her and swiftly subjugate the rebel Ikuta Sankrei—!」

Ikuta stared with his eyes open, and looked clearly shaken, unlike anything he had shown before. When he saw that reaction, Trisnai deepened his smile.

「Fu, fufufu— you are turning pale. You weren't fazed when 20 million citizens were held hostage, but all the colours are drained from your face now. Is fighting her that terrifying? Is having your greatest ally turn into your enemy that daunting!?」

The youth couldn't find the words to refute. Outsiders would have no idea how horrifying this situation was to him. Ikuta shivered as the unexpected blow from the fox shook him greatly.

「The Remeon is incapacitated right now, and the largest faction in the Dafuma Province is definitely the Igsem. Even accounting for their losses so far, the number of troops they can muster within the province will be around 5,000. I repeat, this unit will be led by Yatorishino Igsem— well? With these facts in mind, are you still confident of your earlier declaration? And draw out the fight for months?」

「……!」

「Rejoice. Your only option is to fight. Aside from fending off the Igsem that is attacking with twice your numbers, you have no other choices. This battle will literally decide the future of the Empire. When you win this fight, you will become the official army and take the place of the Igsem!」

The villainous minister said in a loud and cheerful tone, with a gleam of madness in his eyes. Trisnai Izanma was forcing the youth before him into the battlefield.

「What's there to hesitate? Achieving victory by defeating the enemy, that applies to you too. Don't hold back and take action. So what if the body count piles up to four or five thousand? If you become the leader of the military, you can launch any counter offensive you like. Even if the enemy seized some territory for now, you can just reclaim it later. With the wits of Ikuta Sankrei, it will be a cake walk!」

Words urging him to kill each other spilled out from the lungs of the fox. His every word clung on to Ikuta unpleasantly, making him back away with his shoulders quivering.

「Most important of all, you have the reason to kill the Igsem— Hey, have you forgotten? What the Igsem did to you in the past, the pain of losing your parents and the lament on your lost childhood! Have you forgotten all that!?」

That last sentence crossed the line. Realizing he had reached his limits and couldn't stand this any more, the youth turned and left. Trisnai's voice chased after Ikuta's back:

「This is a gospel, Ikuta Sankrei. You can rise to the top if you accept it, or return to dust if you reject it.」

To stop hearing anymore, Ikuta climbed quickly up the stairs, taking two steps with every stride. But no matter how fast he went, the voice still caught up to him.

「Get this clear— do not make the same mistake as your father.」

「L-Lieutenant Colonel Yatorishino, that edict just now…」

Yatori's superior in the past, Major Nudakka Megu, who was now her adjutant, looked at her with a cramped face. Under the watchful gazes of all her subordinates, the vermillion haired girl shook her head calmly:

「… Don't panic. It's not clear if we will follow the edict. According to the law, edicts issued under threats or duress are not legally binding.」

Yatori calmed the wavering Major. Even though she just heard that explosive news, she kept her sharp wits about her.

「Whether that edict is legal will be judged by the Field Marshal, not me. His Majesty might have fallen into the hands of another faction, we will muster all the forces in the area to prepare for a final battle. We will only engage the enemy when it meets the condition of 『necessary battle』 defined for our search mission. If everyone keeps to the principle of this directive, we won't need to alter our actions.」

She declared firmly, and looked in the opposite direction of the destination— towards the main base.

「Send a messenger towards Hunger Castle at full speed. The fastest we can expect an answer is in four days, so we have to catch up to the 『Rising Sun Regiment』 search team before that— let's continue the march.」

Seeing their commander acting as cool as a cucumber, the troops calmed down. They started to march again, and the unit headed south in an orderly formation.

However— right before they set off, Major Megu caught up to the vermillion haired figure in front, and asked quietly:

「Lieutenant Colonel, may I ask something?」

「What is it, Major Megu?」

Yatori didn’t turn, and just answer with a sideways glance. Major Megu hesitated for a moment, then asked:

「After receiving that edict, how do you think the field marshal… your father will act?」

It took a long time to receive an answer. The vermillion haired girl carefully chose her words to answer.

「… If the contents of the edict favors the rebel forces, father will ignore it. However, that wasn’t true for the content just now, and seems to be supporting us instead. On the other hand, there is also a part that threaten to brand dissenters as the traitor army, and those who listen as the official government army. It took away our ability to choose, and forces us to fight each other— that is probably Trisnai Izanma’s intentions.」

「……!」

「Father should understand that, and see how much casualty it will cause if he followed the vicious scheme of the chancellor… However, he will still be troubled by this. From the perspective of the official army, the 『Rising Sun Regiment』 is just a rebel force, while the Emperor is in their hands. It’s vexing, but sending an edict that says 『Disregard my safety and subjugate the rebels』 is very compelling. If we don’t follow, that will be leaving an illicit force to infringe on the authority of the throne. The citizens will probably think of this meek attitude ill fitting and disloyal to the official army.」

Yatori gripped the hilt of her blades unconsciously. She understood how heavy the responsibility entrusted to her clan, and could imagine her father’s struggle as if it was happening to herself.

「I can’t tell what father will decide— for now, we can only wait.」

As he ran towards the tent where the officers were gathered, the youth wanted to scream from anxiety, and kept thinking.

He had fallen into a trap— Ikuta bit his lips as he thought about the result of his meeting with Trisnai.

Should he have pretended to accept the conditions offered before linking up with the Remeon faction? — he regretted for an instant, then changed his mind as it was meaningless. Even if he did that, the fox will still issue a similar edict, forcing them to fight each other. Trisnai never planned for the forces to meet up. Destroying the balance between the three factions and forcing the Rising Sun Regiment and Igsem faction into direct conflict— Ikuta had to accept that as Trisnai's goal.

「Tch…!」

Unable to spare the effort to act calm, Ikuta charged into the tent with a serious face. His companions inside turned his way with a pale face:

「Ikuta-san……!」 「Hey, that Jewel Voice Broadcast just now—!」

Nodding slightly in response to Haro and Matthew, the youth glared at the map on the table:

「It might become true—Torway, what's our current distance from the Igsem main forces!?」

「The last time we saw them was four days ago, so I can only make rough estimations… I think they are less than 120 km away. They will catch up in 3 days at most.」

「Since Yatori is in command, maybe we don't even have 2 days… Damn it, there's no time!」

The youth slammed his hands on the table, and fell into deep thought in that position— a few seconds later, he shouted:

「We will set off immediately! Everyone, get your unit ready!」

「Huh— W-Wait! Where do you want to go?」

「I haven't decided, but we are going south! There's nowhere to run in this village. It can't deal with a fire attack! If the enemy attacks

with no regards to the Emperor's safety, we can't even hold them off for a day…!」

Ikuta knew very well that he didn't have a plan, and yelled. This quarantine forest was in a middle of a small forest, and couldn't defend against fire attacks. For an enemy that wasn't bothered by the Emperor's safety, this place had no strategic value at all. Ikuta's group would either be burned alive, or get wiped out as they attempt to escape the fire— they would be destroyed either way.

「We will go south and find a suitable terrain to set up our defence line. This is a sloppy make shift plan, but there's no other way…!」

「B-But what about linking up with the Remeon faction—」

「That plan is destroyed by Trisnai's spies that infiltrate them. The Remeon faction is busy dealing with their traitors, and if Yatori reached more than one day earlier than them, both of our forces will be destroyed in turns. There is a high chance of that happening if we stay here.」

Everything the youth said made the group realize how dire the situation was. In the suffocating atmosphere, Princess Chamille asked in a trembling voice:

「S-Solork… does that mean… We are going to fight Yatori…?」

「If we can be defeated easily, she might have to make that decision. So we have to shift our base.」

Ikuta used his last bit of mental strength to soften his tone and explain to the Princess. He pat the Princess' head to calm her down, then showed a serious gaze to his comrades:

「We are burning daylight, everyone, get moving!」

In the commander's office on the sixth floor of the Hunger Castle, Field Marshal Solvenares Igsem and his tense officers listened to the edict relayed by the Sprites.

「… What do you think, Field Marshal Sir?」

「I never imagined that the Emperor would give his permission in such a way…」

A short while later, the group around the table reacted to that statement. Some asked the Field Marshal's opinion meekly, while others expressed their views proactively:

「… I object. This is obviously Trisnai Izanma's scheme, nothing good will come from accepting this.」

「I concur. Firstly, the risk is too high. The leader of the Rising Sun Regiment… the second rebel force is the son of that famous Bada Sankrei. His performance in the northern territories was outstanding, proving that his ability is on par with his heritage, and not to be taken lightly.」

Two Lieutenant Colonels who were the younger of the staff officers mustered their courage and proposed prudence. They were immediately reprimanded by their older colleagues.

「How can we cower at such a time! What kind of soldiers will ignore an edict to protect the authority of the throne!」

「Indeed. Since we can save His Majesty before the Remeon interfere, and kill off the leader of the 2nd rebel force, it will be foolish of us to not make use of this opportunity. We should include the precondition of this being a short term battle— and send out a subjugation force if the objective can be completed in six or seven days.」

「Yes. We have liberated the First Prince, and that 『Ice Lady』—Lucika Krukk was killed in battle. The Remeon faction search team must be in chaos after losing their leader. The balance between the three forces in Dafuma Province have crumbled… We have no reason to not use this chance.」

The chorus of agreements gained momentum for the hawkish side. The two younger officers felt a sense of danger and stood up:

「Please wait. It's too hasty to do this…! There's no guarantee that we will win, and if the fight drags on, there's the risk of Kioka invading!」

It will be good if they did invade— the young officers hoped in their hearts as they raised their heated objection.

The scouts that had left with message pigeons had sent reports that the Kioka army had not stepped into the former eastern territories. This fact had extended the time limit to suppress the coup, and was a key factor in the strong attitude of the officers before them. There was still half a month of buffer time, so they could afford to use strong measures if they could take down the enemy in a few days. If the enemy was marching to their borders, their opinion would have been different.

「We have not received word of an invasion, but assuming that Kioka are mustering their forces to do so, what will happen in half a month…? Even if this works, the results will be the same if our comrades die in droves. Maybe we shouldn't solve this with force, and negotiate with the other factions…?」

「Why you little… Are you trying to butter up to the rebels!? Have you no pride as an imperial soldier!」

「Say what you want! Even if this is buttering up to the enemy, I want to protect our country! I believe this is the duty of a soldier, that's why I fought for so long…!」

The officers with differing opinions started their heated debate, lashing out at each other and was almost coming to blows. The red haired general looked at his subordinates, and said right before things got out of hand:

「Keep quiet—」

His words silence the room that was on the verge of erupting. The officers turned docile like toothless beasts, and waited for the sharp eyed Field Marshal to speak.

「……」

The red haired general remained quiet. There wasn't time for him to take his sweet time to think, but he couldn't rush to a decision either. The man struggled to find the right answer as his mind continued to churn and scrape his very soul.

He went through the conditions on the strategic and tactical level, and whether to fight depending on the situation— it was smooth up until this stage, and he arrived at a military answer from the information available to him. The problem was after that. There was an intense battle going off in his heart, where no one else could see.

Memories flashed across the mind of the Field Marshal. The face of his daughter, the face of the close friend he lost, the face of his friend's son, as well as the kindness he needed to repay and responsibilities he needed to shoulder. The harsh thing was, he couldn't ignore any of them. Lined up neatly in his heart were all the values that the man had to defend with his life.

However— before the contradictions caused any fatal crack in the red haired general's character, he categorized them mercilessly, trimming everything unnecessary to his core goal— and finally, only the path the man had to choose as an Igsem remained.

「… I have come to a conclusion.」

He stated the path they would take— he had no right to apologize to his dear friend.

To be honest, when he was forced to set off without a destination in mind, the youth already knew he had been forced to the brink.

Yatori led the Igsem search team and kept chasing them south as expected. Ikuta's group had not been caught yet, but they would run into their pursuers if they turned back north, and if they turned to the east or west, they would get caught in the middle of the plains in no time. Through the process of elimination, the only escape route

was due south— but even this choice wasn't good enough to give them hope.

When Ikuta's group arrived at the quarantined village, they were already near the southern end of the Dafuma Province. If they went south, they would reach the border of the province, and anyone who could read a map knew what awaited them there.

The further they went, the less greenery there were. Barren sand and boulder became more prominent, and rocks block their path. The size of the boulders gradually grew in size until finally, ones that were taller than men could be seen anywhere— as the terrain changed completely, the scene before them looked like something out of an apocalypse.

There were dry stones everywhere, and the boulders didn't have any cracks for weeds to grow in. Life was sparse in this greyish brown place, as the wind kick up clouds of dust.

The Kugurosaebo rocky terrains. The barren grounds opened up before them.

「… We're going through here…?」

Haro asked uneasily as she looked at the terrain which was devoid of life. Torway shook his head weakly beside her:

「It can't be helped. There's no village ahead, and we have to depend on the Sprites for drinking water. Including the supply team that will soon follow, we have only seven days of food if we ration them… Stepping into this rocky place without supplies is suicide.」

Anyone would find that logical. Matthew sat down on a boulder:

「T-Then, what do we do...」

No one could answer. They all kept their peace as a heavy silence hung over them… But even though he didn't see any way out, the youth still waited for the sign that would show them the way forward.

「— Is this it?」

Ikuta who was the only one looking to the north found what he was looking for.

「My dear Matthew, it's too early to despair.」

This made everyone in the Knight Corp turned towards the north—where a few horsemen were heading their way from a few hundred meters out through the difficult terrain. A short while later, they joined their comrades receiving them and reported to Ikuta.

「Report! The messenger from the Remeon search team is here!」

「I'm Sergeant Major Daio Naga! I seek an audience with Ikuta Sankrei-san and Torway Remeon-san!」

The two named officers responded. When Torway saw the face of the messenger, his expression brightened a little:

「Sergeant Major Naga, it's you!」

「Yes, First Lieutenant. Thank you for your support during the last battle again. Your valiant figure in that fight is still fresh on my mind.」

The aged Sergeant bared his teeth in a smile. The youth smiled back, and introduced him to his comrades:

「Oh, he's my big brother—Major Sarihasrag's subordinate. He's a veteran sergeant back during my days as a cadet. He had served with my father before, and is reliable and experienced.」

In a sense, his relationship to Torway was similar to Suya's relationship with Ikuta. Capable sergeants were highly valued in the army, and would often be tasked with assisting rookie officers. His close relationship with the Remeon house proved that he was trustworthy, and the dark haired youth nodded:

「Yes. Given the current circumstances, it's a relief to have someone trustworthy relay the orders. Sergeant Major Naga, it's

incredibly forward of me, but can you tell us the situation on your side in detail?」

「Yes Sir. It's embarrassing to say, but our search team is in disarray, because some of the officers and men had turned traitor. They had not usurp command of the faction, but our communications and supply lines are disrupted, so the forces we spread out for the search are still all over the place. Acting Commanding Officer Major Sarihasrag is working to reestablish the command structure—」

「Huh— Big Brother? Wait, I remember the Commanding Officer is—」

An ominous feeling made Torway asked loudly. Sergeant Major Naga lowered his gaze depressedly.

「… Regrettably, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika Krukk died in battle. She was attacked by the Igsem faction, and personally led the detachment escorting the First Prince to escape, and in the end…」

When he heard the terrible news, the jade eyed youth lost the color in his face and stood stiffly.

「Teacher… is dead…?」

「… Yes. I saw the body with my own eyes.」

Torway's shoulder trembled a little. After glancing his way, Ikuta took over the conversation:

「In any case, can we take it that the Igsem faction had seized the First Prince?」

「Unfortunately, that is correct… We also want to ask, is His Majesty traveling with you?」

「Yes, we brought the Emperor with us when we left the quarantine village. Right now, he is staying with the chancellor inside that carriage.」

The youth pointed to a carriage parked nearby, then added:

「If you wish to see for yourself, then lay down your arms and head over there alone. I permit you to check under the supervision of my men.」

When he heard that, Sergeant Major Naga immediately turned to his companions and gestured to them with a gaze. Ikuta also called his men over, and told them the gist of what to look out for.

「Back to the topic, that sadistic pretty boy… No, Major Sarihasrag, how much control does he have over the unit? Is he ready to march?」

「It will take some time to gather all the forces, but the Major is prioritizing sending men over here. He will gather the minimum force that won't be taken out easily, and is large enough to intimidate the Igsem faction── 3,000 men, before sending them over.」

When he heard what the Sergeant Major said, the pudgy youth interjected:

「Huh── reinforcements are coming!? W-When will they reach?」

「That depends on where you will link up with us… If it is this place, it will be around four days later.」

When he heard that number, Matthew who had found hope turned pale again.

「Four days later…? But Yatori's group will catch us in a day or two!」

「Shortening this number… I'm sorry, but I'm in no position to make any guarantees. Even four days is assuming the march is at a harsh pace. Any faster, then we will be sending us less than 3,000 men, or there would be many people dropping out from the march, wearing out the men before the fight…」

「So you want us to hold out for four days? Against Yatori's unit that is almost twice our numbers? Don't be absurd, we are not defending a fort here!」

The slightly plump youth spread his arms out to indicate the barren grounds around him as he shouted:

「Considering how far we can move from here, there isn't any defensible structures down south! There's no river, mountains or valleys! There's only barren rocky terrain, how can we hold out for that long…!」

Matthew's wail made Haro bowed her head, and Sergeant Major Naga was at a loss for words.

「… We will wait for five days.」

As the atmosphere descended into despair, Ikuta said confidently. Everyone's gaze fell on the map he laid out:

「I will add one more day, Sergeant Major Naga. We will march south for another day, and set up base around this area— the northern part of this rocky plains, fend off the Igsem attack and hold out for reinforcements. I can't tell you the actual spot, but we will light smoke signals on the third day, so just rush to us at full speed. Will this arrangement work?」

「I-It's fine for us… But can your unit hold out for that long?」

「We will make it work. So your reinforcements have to be timely too— listen, make haste, even if it's just a second earlier. It's no exaggeration to say that a second might be the crucial factor in the success of this drawn out battle. That's the kind of battle we are facing. Please keep that in mind right from the start.」

To avoid misleading him with an optimistic outlook, the youth instructed with urgency. Sergeant Major Naga understood his intent, and nodded with his eyes looking right at Ikuta:

「— I understand. I will relay every word without fail to Major Sarihasrag.」

「Yes, please.」

Their conversation ended here. After receiving the message for his superiors, Sergeant Major Naga and his companions lead their horses away. As he watched their backs, the dark haired youth sighed with a wry smile.

「… I never imagined that there will be a day when I have to wait for that masochist pretty boy to rescue us.」

Ikuta said to no one in particular. Unaware of his thoughts, Haro and Matthew shouted at the same time:

「C-Can we hold out? In this place for five days…」

「Are you serious!? Defending for four days, with Yatori as our enemy…?」

Ikuta raised both hands to ease their worries:

「Calm down. Change your perspective a little, going into the rocky terrain isn't that bad, since it will hobble the Igsem's cavalry. It's a hundred times better than being charged on an open plain.」

「That's true, but they have more windgunners than us. We can't set up a defensive net if there's no cover! We will be crushed if they overwhelm us with numbers…!」

He shook his head to refute the pudgy youth's worries:

「Your judgement is wrong because you are too hasty, Matthew. I said we will be fighting in the rocky terrain, not here. We will discuss how to fight after we head to the south.」

After saying that, the youth turned his eyes back to the south:

「Let's continue our march. We have entered the rocky region, but this is just the entrance. The boulders will get larger as we go deeper in, and the terrain will be more complicated—Torway, don't daze off. We need your keen eyes.」

Ikuta forcibly pulled the youth back to reality, getting his mind off the loss of his teacher. There was no time to mourn, Ikuta had to distract him with the tasks at hand.

「This terrain stretches out in all directions. Hence, there must be a place here where we can hold out for four days. An indispensable place for our survival—」

The Igsem faction search team pursuing them in the southern part of the Dafuma Province had gotten hold of Ikuta's movement from their scout reports.

「They have entered the rocky terrain… Are they planning to leave the province and flee to the south?」

「That's too rash, since they can't resupply, so they must be planning something else.」

Yatori chatted with Major Megu as she thought about the enemy's plans. But she didn't have to think at all, as the messenger stated the answer plainly:

「Report! The second rebel force has set up camp 6 km to the south west!」

Yatori's unit trod carefully along the rocky terrain as they headed towards the enemy location. They didn't take long to reach there, and she climbed up on a rocky hill nearby to survey the Rising Sun Regiment search team.

「… This is…」

Even though there were rocks all over the place, this place was prominent in its own right. First of all, there was a large grey hill bulging up in the area. And not just one, but several of them were in close vicinity, with a large number of soldiers bustling on top of the hill or around it. After observing for some time, Yatori said:

「They have chosen this place with exposed boulders, and had posted troops on top and in the gaps to defend their base. They had probably deployed their illumination troops and snipers, ready to engage attacks from any direction. As for the cover for their soldiers… they are piling up the rocks to build them manually.」

「But… to think they found a suitable terrain. Not just for a hundred or two hundred soldiers, it must be difficult to find a place to accommodate 2,000 men…」

When Major Megu said that with arms crossed, the vermillion haired girl shook her head.

「It's at best 70%.」

「Huh?」

「They conditions they needed and how well the terrain fit their requirement. They are working desperately to close that gap.」

Yatori watched the scene before her, and analyzed how suited it was for military use:

「At a glance, the shape of the rocky zones aren't uniform. Some are too steep for them to scale, while others are too shallow for their defences. Some of the hills are too short too. It is possible to make up for this with manual work, but they don't have time to fill in all the gaps. In the end, they have to deploy more troops there to mitigate the issue.」

She listed the advantages and weaknesses of the enemy, and gauged the enemy's defence through what she could see.

「Compared to the work needed to build a fort, the amount of rocks, workers and time— are insufficient. Aside from some lucky instances, a lot of effort is needed to reinforce the natural terrain into a stronghold.」

She grasped the situation the opponent faced, and turned to Major Megu and stated the plan:

「Split our forces into three, and send them to north northwest, northeast east, and the south of their base. They are getting their rocks shortage from outside their base, and just doing so will be enough to keep them in check.」

Concurring with a nod, the middle aged officer gathered the troops to relay the instructions. Leaving the details to the Major, Yatori sighed softly.

「… That's not all we can do. There's all sorts of ways to disrupt their work, but if we execute them, we might start the battle while we are still not ready.」

The girl muttered uneasily— No matter how many weak spots she saw, she hoped she didn't have to attack them. The thoughts of the Knight Corps members hustling around to strengthen the defences made Yatori close her eyes in pain.

「Lieutenant Colonel Yatorishino.」

Someone called out to her from behind. She turned back and saw a few subordinates standing there with serious faces.

「A message from the Hunger Castle headquarters.」

Thump! Her heart pounded. She tried to keep cool on the surface, and forced her lips to move.

「Give me the letter.」

On her urging, a soldier carefully proffered the letter kept inside a leather folder. Yatori received it with both hands, opened it carefully, and couldn't help closing her eyes when she saw a part of the contents.

「……」

Just checking the contents of the letter drained all of her courage. She took a minute to open her eyes— at that moment, the familiar writing from her father appeared mercilessly before her.

— We have to act by placing the nation's establishment as our priority.

Yatori nodded after reading that line. That much was obvious.

— The Katjvarna Empire is founded with the Emperor possessing absolute power, which ensures order and stability to the citizens.

She nodded again. The peace of the citizens were established under the unquestionable authority of the Emperor, that was the nature of the Empire.

— And we serve His Majesty as our lord, with our very lives.

She nodded for the third time. That was a given, the Imperial soldiers had to be such an existence.

— However, the authority of His Majesty is being threatened by villains. Both the safety of the Emperor and the independence of the crown are in danger of being compromised.

She read on without blinking. She understood everything so far. It was only the text that follows which she had difficulty fanthoming.

— In conclusion, we will prioritize the safety of the reigning Emperor, and ensure the normal rule and succession of the royal family. This is our duty as the guardian of order within the Empire.

「———」

Yatori turned stiff, and took a long while to understand the content of that passage.

She did so after reading it seven times. Or rather, she was checking for any other way to interpret it.

It implies that even if they left the reigning Emperor to die, as soldiers and guardians of the nation, they had a duty to ensure the independence and authority of the next Emperor.

「………………」

She kept thinking over it repeatedly, and searched for a loophole in that logic. However— there wasn't any contradictions.

Because— the Igsem and Imperial soldiers did not pledge their loyalty solely to a person.

All people would die one day. In contrast, the throne of the Emperor could be passed down even in death.

When the former and latter were placed on a scale, soldiers would have to prioritize the latter.

— Performing the duties described above is the essence of the Emperor's edict.

That was true. Even though the edict was issued by the Chancellor who was controlling the Emperor like a puppet, there was nothing wrong with this order, and the Igsem couldn't refute it. No matter what, they had no reason to ignore the order to protect the Emperor's right to rule, which was the foundation of the country.

— Based on the above, the search team commander working independently have to confirm the below conditions.

Yatori knew her pupils were dilating. This last part was the key point she had to read.

— First, to confirm the existence of a faction that is confining the Emperor, and attempting to seize control of the nation in that place.

Judging from the values of the Igsem, there was.

— Second, whether the forces on hand is enough to achieve victory against that faction.

Two thousand odd against five thousand. She had to admit that it was possible.

— Third, is it possible to defeat that faction by force within 6 days of receiving this order.

If it was possible… then what?

— If these three conditions are met, then by order of the Imperial Field Marshal Solvenares Igsem, the search team commander acting independently will be ordered to execute the below mission.

Like I said, what exactly is that order?

— Subjugate the rebel force, and kill their leader.

In the second rebel force, the former imperial soldier Ikuta Sankrei met these conditions.

That was the answer, there was no room for doubt.

Her mind turned blank. Her vision was white. She lost all sensation from her head to the tips of her toes.

She floated in the crumbling world. Everything that bounded Yatorishino to this reality was shaking, like the feathers flying from a ripped pillow, scattering into the void.

「—Lieutenant Colonel?」

To a bystander, she just looked like a little unsteady on her feet. But that was enough to make her subordinates rush to her side. She had never looked so lost before.

Yatori didn't answer anyone who called out to her. She didn't even react to her partner Shia. It was like speaking to a hole in a boulder.

More than five minutes later, her crimson eyes slowly regained focus before the frantic soldiers. However, she only gained back a bit of strength. The vermillion haired girl's face had lost all its colors, as she stood there emotionlessly like a sculpture.

「…………」

Even in such a condition, Yatori still tried to do something. Something was pushing her to do so. Something deep inside the vermillion haired girl, a steel-like resolve that wouldn't permit the girl to do something as unsightly as falling onto her knees.

「…… Give me…」

Her lips quivered slightly as she spoke. The subordinates listened with bated breath to her voice that sounded like the breathing of someone on their deathbeds.

「Give me, some, time.」

After saying that with all her self restraint, Yatori turned around with stiff steps, and headed to the tent in front of her. She tripped on pebbles jutting out to the ground several times, and almost fell. The

soldiers were beyond shaken, and felt fear at her abnormal demeanour.

「……!……」

After stumbling into the tent, she put down the tent cover almost unconsciously. Yatori walked to the middle of the tent, and suddenly stopped.

「——」

At that moment, the girl realized why she came here.

Just like what she said in the past— she had to perform a ritual.

「— Ah, ah…」

Her stalled mind changed direction and went backwards to the past. The flood of memory overflowed and submerged her entire body, the waves washing her very soul. Yatori was slowly drawn into the giant whirlpool formed by her memories.

As she sunk deep into the past— she recalled their reunion at the bottom of the waters.

On a bright spring morning, the Imperial Shigaru High and Middle Schools held a joint school entrance ceremony.

More than a thousand young boys and girls stood on the field with hope and ambition gleaming in their eyes. Only a minority felt uneasy about embarking on this new stage of life, most of them believe that they were the talent that would shoulder the future of the Empire. That was only natural, since they all hailed from wealthy families that could afford the expensive school fees, and earned their spots here after passing difficult exams that tested their mettle.

「Young ones with bright futures that squeezed through the narrow doors and made it here. I congratulate you sincerely on this beautiful day.」

The person who welcomed them spurred the young people with his words. He showered them with praise and cautioned them,

taunted them and then taught them to differentiate right from all. After beating around the bush, he affirmed the value of them competing with each other. This was just the entrance to the springboard, their bright future still lies in the unclear future, and they would fall into the abyss with any missteps— his warning entered the ears of the excited new students.

「Well then, next would be the declaration by the incoming cohort. Middle school freshmen representative— Yatorishino Igsem!」

The speech was over soon, and the teacher called out to the girl at the fore of the young group. The girl who was named stepped up onto the podium in her brand new uniform.

Her childishness that had faded was replaced by a strong sense of elegance, her body was supple and had a sense of functional beauty, and her vermillion haired fluttered in the wind. The thirteen years old Yatorishino Igsem had breathtaking charm and style.

Respect, envy, admiration and competitiveness— Eyes filled with all sorts of emotions fell on her. Unfazed by the gazes, the vermillion haired girl and the high school representative stood shoulder to shoulder at the podium, and stared at their competitors.

「We solemnly swear to cherish the opportunity for us to study, and seek physical and mental fortitude—」

Her clear voice spread to every corner of the field. Not just the students, even the teachers were mesmerized by the righteousness in her declaration. This scene already set the tone on who would be in the center of their future campus life.

After interacting with the teachers and new students for a while, Yatori turned down an invitation to an after party, then strolled around the school by herself. Since she would be studying here for several years, she couldn't hold back her urge to recce the terrain. This was definitely the result of her Igsem military house upbringing.

She entered the school building and looked at each classrooms and other rooms one by one, her mind tracking the place on a 3 dimension map. She finished her survey in less than an hour, then headed for the non academic facilities. There was a garden for plants observation, and a flat exercise field where students regularly visits.

There were many people staying in the open facilities for all sorts of purposes. The girl saw a similar layout in the past. She suddenly stopped. Whenever she recalled that incident, she would stop in her tracks and look up into the sky.

「It had been four years since then—」

Yatori muttered quietly. It had been that long since her exchange study with the Rising Sun Regiment.

Bada Sankrei's imprisonment and mysterious death. His wife and son went missing, and the Rising Sun Regiment was disbanded— Everything that had happened remained unresolved. At least, not for her.

Yatori started walking again with that in mind, and suddenly felt a presence from above and raised her right hand up high. Thud! A walnut landed on her palm. Yatori looked up with a sigh.

「… I don't know who you are, but can I throw this back?」

The girl pulled her right arm back as she aimed at the rude person above her. A voice came from the tree:

「W-Wait! I'm coming down!」

A figure climbed down quickly, and reached the ground in a few seconds. It was a dark haired boy wearing a Shigaru middle school uniform just like Yatori. He had an average built, but his face looked world-weary, and he wore his uniform really sloppily.

「Really now, I have to risk my life just to play a prank on you.」

The vermillion haired girl frowned at this person she had only met who was speaking so intimately with her:

「You seem to be a freshman too. Do you have some business with me?」

When she asked that, the boy opened his eyes wide, then drooped his shoulders. Yatori was shocked at how depressed he looked.

「… That reaction hurt me. I didn't expect it to hurt this much.」

His sullen reaction confused the girl further. The boy told her through pouted lips:

「Did my face change that much?— It's me, Yatori. Your other half.」

The boy smiled, and it matches a smile in the vermillion haired girl's memories. The mind numbing blow made her open her crimson eyes wide.

「——Ikuta?」

Before she realized it, Yatori had walked over to the boy and touched his face and his entire body. If she didn't feel him with her hands, she wouldn't be able to believe her own eyes.

「It seems… you are not a ghost. You have a body.」

「I'm a scientist after all, it will be embarrassing for me to show up as a ghost.」

The boy joked. His tone overlapped with her memories, and the girl was convinced. He wasn't a spirit and she wasn't day dreaming. She strengthened her grip on his shoulder unnecessarily.

「… I know I don't have the right to say this, but I still want to tell you...」

Tossing her self restraint aside, the girl spoke. In this instant, she wanted to convey her feelings more than anything else in the world.

「I'm glad that you are safe. I'm really… glad.」

She said emotionally. What else could she say? The person she had been worrying about, the other half whose fate was unknown, had appeared before her alive and well.

「I couldn't introduce you earlier, but I have a partner now. This is Kusu, my life savior.」

They sat beside each other at a corner of the courtyard, and told each other how they were doing after four years. Yatori smiled at the sprite Ikuta was holding up.

「You formed a contract with a Luminous sprite, huh— Nice to meet you, Kusu. I'm Yatorishino Igsem, you can call me Yatori. This is my partner, the fire sprite Shia.」

「Nice to meet you, Yatori. Ikuta often mention about you, I heard that you are very outstanding.」

The answer was more fluent than she expected, which surprised the girl. Normally, a sprite wouldn't say something so fluidly to a person they just met.

「Because Kusu didn't have a master for a long time, so it is very worldly. I would often talk with it.」

「It appears so, I'm surprised.」

After chatting with the unusual Luminous sprite for a little, Yatori looked at the boy again:

「… Speaking of which, how did you come here? Is that uniform real?」

「Well, it's a long story—」

With his hands on the grass, Ikuta grunted and started telling what happened to him.

「When that thing happened to Dad, my Mom and I hid in the mountains for the first two years.」

「In the mountains…? Literally?」

「Yes, literally. It's right in the middle of a forest in the mountains. Dangerous people were pursuing us, so we hid in the place prepared

for such emergencies and waited for the situation to calm down. However… there was more turbulence than we expected.」

The boy said as he fiddled with the weeds. The girl could tell from his actions that he was trying to describe a heavy topic in a light hearted manner.

「About three months after living in the mountains, those people discovered the first hideout. The soldiers protecting us didn't return after going out. To escape from our pursuers, my Mom and I ran deeper into the hills. We didn't run about aimlessly, and headed to the next hideout as the soldiers instructed. However—」

Ikuta laid down on the grass and continued:

「The second hideout was renovated from an old charcoal making house, and was far more run down than the first one. That couldn't be helped, but the biggest problem was food and water— we used up the provisions in a month, and also lost the water sprite during our escape from the first hideout. But we couldn't come down from the hills, and had to search for food there.」

The girl bit her lip as she thought about the life he had. The boy carried on, but his tone had grown heavier:

「Hunting and gathering were more tedious than I imagined. The entire day was spent on it, and we would starve if we didn't get any results. I managed to hang on by the outdoor skills and knowledge I learned through my Dad's 『mission』, but everyday was like walking on a tightrope… Until one day, we fell.」

His last sentence froze the blood in Yatori's entire body. She finally asked the one thing she had been meaning to, but couldn't say.

「… Aunt Yuka is…」

「My Mom has something she wants me to tell you.」

Ikuta laid back with his eyes closed, and said in a trembling voice:

「『Sorry. I want to pat your head again.』— that's what she said.」

That cleared up everything. Yuka's frail smile flashed across her mind, and tore at Yatori's heart.

「My Mom had always been frail. She never showed it, but she was worn out sooner than me. But she never thought about going down the mountains once, and exhausted her life to let me live on— and one day, she collapsed. Like a taut string finally snapping.」

At the end of their long escape, was the death of his mother.

「Mom passed away that night… there wasn't even time to seek help.」

The girl couldn't say anything. The boy shook his head in response to her silence:

「Cry, Yatori. If you hold back, then no one will shed tears for Mom.」

Ikuta opened his eyes a little to see the blue sky, his voice no longer trembling as he said:

「I have no more tears to shed—」

The two of them went to the cafeteria in the campus and continued talking about the past. There weren't any classes today, so the cafeteria was deserted with only a handful of students. They chose seats at the corner to avoid others overhearing their conversation.

「… After hesitating for some time, I decided on a fire burial. Animals will dig her up if I bury her in the wild, and it will be difficult to visit her tomb in the future too. Anyway, I took her ashes down the mountains after two years. Partly because my life in hiding is at its limits, and also because I lost the prominent feature of being 『mother and son』. It would be hard for my pursuers to identify me. Ironically, there are countless orphans in this world.」

The boy took a sip of water and frowned:

「However… losing my mother took a heavy toll on me. I felt my body grew heavy after going down the mountains, and could barely move when I reached the outskirts of the village. After going into an empty house in front of me, I blacked out. It wouldn't be strange if I died there— and then, Kusu appeared.」

Ikuta smiled as he pointed at his tiny partner sitting on a cloth he laid out on the table.

「There is an orphanage where I blacked out, and Kusu was taking care of the children there. A long time before I met him, his former master who worked at the orphanage died from illness. As you know, sprites that lost their master will enter 『waiting for contract』 mode. If they can't find the next master around them, the sprite will start wandering around to search for a new master. It found me during its search.」

As he caressed Kusu's head, the boy continued cheerfully:

「I then joined the Solork orphanage. I didn't get along with the orphanage director, but hit it off with a staff named Floshira, who helped me a lot. That and Kusu finding me were consecutive strokes of good luck after a long time.」

He stopped at this point, and informed her:

「Hence, my name now is Ikuta Solork, you have to call me that too. I can't use my old family name anymore.」

Officially, he was still on the run. The vermillion haired girl nodded without any hesitation:

「So this is the first time we met, that's the official story.」

This was unnecessary to keep the boy alive. Ikuta nodded and said:

「— As for why I'm here, the Solork orphanage isn't an illegal establishment used to trick people of their donations, but an official orphanage recognized by the nation. So the national scholarship

programs applies to them too. It is a scholarship given to children with extraordinary performances, and there aren't any bonds if some conditions are met. The system also provide recommendations to specific schools. Shigaru has a slot, and I got that scholarship.」

「To think you got a hold of that recommendation. You are definitely capable, but you are on bad terms with the director of the orphanage, right? I can't imagine you buttering up to people you dislike.」

「It's as you suspected, there are some complications in between, but it all worked out in the end. I made plans in the dark, but most importantly, I had the support of Floshira. The director and the other staff members respects her a lot.」

When she heard that, Yatoru crossed her arms and fell into deep thought:

「I see. I understand how you enrolled here— but you didn't tell me the most important thing.」

「What do you mean?」

「What you said explained how you got here. What I wanted to know is, why are you here. If you are just here to see me, then you don't have to work so hard to earn your recommendation.」

Ikuta smiled in response to her sharp question.

「I want to be your school mate— isn't that good enough of a reason?」

「I'm really happy. This explanation is good enough for Yatorishino, and I want to jump with joy… But I'm asking as an Igsem.」

She stared right at him with her dark crimson eyes that demanded a straight answer.

「You must know by now. You have more than enough reason to hate me.」

When he was asked, the boy lowered his eyes with a lonely expression that Yatori had never seen before.

「You think… that I'm hiding a knife and mean to harm you?」

「I don't… But I won't bear any grudge if you did. I— the Igsem made you suffer so much. We took your home, your parents… and you lost your home, the Rising Sun Regiment forever.」

Ikuta looked up and shook her head at the girl who was admitting her sins.

「I have to correct that first, you aren't the ones who did that. Furthermore, I don't think the Igsem was behind this too, so I have no reason to bear a grudge. Be it to you, your father, or your house. 」

「I thought so too. But my father was the one who arrested General Bada and handed him over to the ministers. And the crimes pinned on Uncle… the shame of acting out of line should have been borne by my father. Because he knew that if no one did that, the country will fall into crisis.」

She didn't uncover the entire incident, but she had found out a lot of facts in the past four years. The girl spoke from what she knew, but the boy remained unmoved, crossing his arms and said:

「… I investigated this incident too. The only thing I'm sure of, is that Dad picked the short straw himself. No one asked him, but I'm very sure of that. Since his buddy can't ignore the edict, then he will take matters into his own hands— mobilizing the army with such thoughts is just like my Dad's style.」

He had reached a conclusion too. The boy followed his late father's thinking and continued:

「My Dad was aware of everything and chose to act, while your father gave his silent consent. I'm not happy that he didn't discuss it with us beforehand, but I don't plan to bear a grudge against any of them. Because there were only two choices. If my Dad wasn't

executed as a war criminal, then the opposite would happen. Isn't that right?」

「That's why you should hate me!」

Yatori raised her voice without realizing it. The calm tone of the boy and his decision to not blame the Igsem was hard for her to accept.

「As a result, the Igsem house kept its standing as the conservative faction in the Imperial army, while the Sankrei house was destroyed as traitors… However, if Uncle Bada didn't shoulder the blame as a war criminal, then the standings of the two houses would be reversed. This means...」

The girl lowered her voice to not let anyone else hear her, and clenched her fists.

「I should have lost everything instead of you—」

Yatori concluded with her gaze lowered. Ikuta looked straight at her and said:

「… Do you remember that day when we fought the wolves? From that day on, I always thought of you as my other half. Like left and right hands, right and left brains, we are two in one.」

The girl nodded. That was one of the most memorable experiences in her thirteen years alive.

「When there are two different situations, we have to endure each one separately. We can't choose who will endure what, but that isn't too much of a problem. The right hand will carry the heavy luggage sometime, and the left hand will carry it in other times. It just happens to be my turn— that's all.

Because, if our situation was reversed, you will tell me the same thing too, right?」

Ikuta asked as if this was a given fact. Yatori questioned with trembling lips:

「… Can you really accept this?」

The boy nodded quietly:

「When I was missing, you are also shouldering a heavy burden. I'm not stupid enough to miss that.」

He was worried about the girl instead. After pausing for a while, his face twisted bitterly:

「… Yes, that's right. Now, the heavy burden is on you instead. To me, the situation is the opposite. I'm the one who is free, while you are the one who is tied down.」

「… What, do you mean?」

In response to Yatori's question, the youth took a deep breath.

「Let me answer your earlier question. Why I am here.」

Ikuta leaned over the table, and replied from close range while staring into her eyes.

「I'm here to abduct you, Yatori. Abduct you away from this country that has no future—」

「There are some people inside the government that wishes for the Igsem to lose their standings.」

The two of them changed location again, and walked out of the campus and into a crowded restaurant nearby. They picked the table furthest inside, and continued talking as the noise from the other patrons masked their conversation.

「And it didn't start recently. The ministers who want to deploy the army at their own convenience detest the segregation of politics and army upheld by the Igsem. Even though they were stopped by the rules that segregates nobles and soldiers, those people still kept trying to send in their people into the military. In response, the imperial army sent such people to the northern territory to keep the integrity of the organization. And of course, I know that this is just a ruse.」

Ikuta scrape the meat off the drumstick he ordered as he continued in a quiet voice. In contrast to their earlier conversation, the content of this talk couldn't be made public for a different reason.

「The ministers wanted to privatize the Army, while the Igsem insisted on the independence of the military. As the two had been on opposing sides under the table for a long time, I think the ministers changed their thinking. They think that — as long as the Igsem continued to lead the military, then there was no way they could get their hands on the Imperial Army. First, they needed to change the leader.」

The chicken drum is overcooked〜 the youth grumbled as he tossed a piece of chicken meat into his mouth. Yatori held the same view towards the dish, and continued listening to him:

「When they first had that thought, I think their first candidate is General Remeon… But they quickly realized that wasn't practical. That general had a firm will that wouldn't be swayed by the nobles, and was just as difficult to deal with as Field Marshal Igsem, and also holds a critical attitude towards the establishment. If that man becomes the leader of the military, it will endanger the positions of the nobles.」

After cleaning out the first drumstick, Ikuta stabbed his dining knife into the other drumstick:

「And the next candidate was my Dad. His words, actions and values weren't like that of a typical soldier, so the ministers think they can get him to compromise, and he was very capable too. Aside from the officers from the Three Loyal House, his performance was the best since Ilshim Giorgo.

Thinking back, despite how my Dad looks, he was great at negotiating with nobles. When his unit needs to be deployed to any place in the country, he will get things sorted out with the locals

ahead of time. It was a hassle, but he still gets it done. There were many adjustments that resembles deals during these interactions, which caused the nobles to misunderstand him. Sigh, it was Dad's mistake for not realizing this situation.」

Ikuta sighed, and started scraping the meat off the chicken bone.

「And so, the scheme to make Bada Sankrei the head of the Imperial Army started turning. They are targeting to unseat Field Marshal Igsem. There must be plenty of twists and turns in between, but I'm not interested in that, and will skip it… What the cabinet members planned was very simple— force Field Marshal Igsem into a position where he had to disobey an imperial edict. When Kioka invaded, the Field Marshal was prohibited from intercepting with his forces. And that was during a situation where he had to act swiftly.」

After scrapping the bone clean with his teethy, the youth continued:

「Your father is stricter with discipline than anyone else, but he would never accept this edict, which is an order that will destroy the Empire. That was what the Emperor's orders implies. Leaving an invading army alone and watching them ravage the Empire's citizens and territory— that was asking him to abandon his duties as a soldier.」

Yatori nodded in silence. The bits and pieces she found out matches the youth's deduction.

「Since the situation has developed this far, your father didn't have many options. Since he couldn't stand by and watch idly, he had to despatch his units against the edict. Everything so far was predetermined— the remaining question is, who will be carrying out this order.

Since the edict demands the military to stand by, the one who mobilize his unit will be charged with treason. If the Field Marshal didn't act, then he had to offer up a sacrifice from his subordinates,

and it has to be an officer of the general ranks. They had to mobilize at least a brigade to defend against the Kioka army.」

When Ikuta said that, the vermillion haired girl added quietly:

「… Furthermore, that person has to be an excellent commander. The Kioka's commander was a formidable foe. If I don't go, I can only ask General Bada— My father said that.」

I see, the youth nodded.

「I know your father isn't someone who will prioritize saving his own skin in such a situation… That's why this was such a painful decision. Should he sacrifice the Igsem to save the country? Or offer up his friend's life? With these two impossible choices, it's not difficult to imagine how torturous the entire process was.

Hence, my Dad made the decision on his own. He sacrificed himself without waiting for anyone to say anything, and mobilized his Rising Sun Regiment to repel the Kioka army— and took on all the blame, dying in prison as a war criminal.」

The youth gripped the cup of fruit juice in his hand harder, his fingernails gradually turning white.

「That damn fool, is he trying to be a hero?」

Ikuta ground his teeth, and ripples appeared in the cup of juice.

「Hey Yatori, why do you think my Dad died? Because of a scheme by the aristocrats? Because he protected the nation even if he had to defy the edict? To stop your father from falling from grace?」

The youth's face turned gloomy as the youth continued with a hollow laugh:

「The answer is all of the above. Simply put, my Dad died from overwork. He took on all the burden himself, and sunk into the mud because of the crushing load… With no regards of how others felt. Even though he taught us that a war is fought by everyone together.
」

The girl lowered her head and bit her lip. Their silence hung heavily in the noisy restaurant.

After pausing for a long while, Ikuta started speaking again. There was a clear sign of resignation on his face:

「The Empire is beyond saving. Soldiers performing their duties aren't rewarded, and their reputation and character gets run into the ground, and tossed aside like a used consumable— Such unreasonable things are happening as if it was normal. I have given up. Be it the Emperor or the nobles, none of them realized that they are strangling their own necks. Either the talents get depleted, or the military abandon the establishment— no matter which comes first, there is only destruction in the future.」

After saying that, the youth stared at the other party before him, and his depressed voice regained some strength:

「Let the country die… However, I can't allow the fall of the nation implicate you, so I came to abduct you. Before you meet the same fate as my Dad, before this nation grinds you to the ground.」

Yatori gasped. Ikuta continued with a serious expression:

「In the near future, I will take you with me and leave the Empire. It's fine to go anywhere we want— anywhere that has a better future than here. I have the means to do so. I have re-established contacts with Gramps Anarai and his disciples, so if I want to, I can escape easily.」

The girl couldn't find the words to respond, and Ikuta nodded slightly, acknowledging how she felt:

「I know you can't accept this proposal so easily. That's why I enrolled in the same school as you, so I can stay by your side and take my time to convince you.」

The dark haired youth showed a bold smile, and raised the glass in his hand up high:

「Brace yourself, Yatori. From now on, I will do everything I can to tempt you to stray into depravity.」

With that joke-like declaration which was entirely serious, the two of them started their life in school.

Right after the school semester begins, Ikuta was obviously not taking classes seriously. He will skip classes on a whim, and sleep openly during lectures. He even built nests in the trees all over campus like a spider. The student body looked dumbfoundedly at his antics from afar, and in a few months, 「Ikuta the Lazy」 was famous in the entire school.

But he didn't turn into a bum after four years either. Yatori noticed shortly after the semester started. Ikuta's laziness was just a performance.

Just like their time together with the Rising Sun Regiment and scientists, the youth understood the joy in learning. He absorb new knowledge, acquired new skills, and learned from history— in the past, he enjoyed all this forthrightly. Be it through practical studies or reading from literature, exploring the unknown was Ikuta's life goal. The foundation remained strong after four turbulent years.

What he lost wasn't the passion towards knowledge, but the innocence of showing it directly. Anyway, he was adamant on wasting as much of the scholarship he snatched from the country as possible. He even wished to show this waste to the people around him. That was probably his way of venting his anger at the country that robbed him of so many things.

「This is very childish— Sigh, I know that too.」

One day after school, the youth muttered as he read a book under a tree. Yatori could only sigh. The fifth lesson for today was geography, and he skipped classes to read 《The Encyclopedia of Geography》.

「But think about it, I spent two years living in the deep mountains without any civilization, so it’s only natural that I will be slower than others in realizing that, correct?」

That was sophistry, but Yatori who knew the reason behind this had no intention of chiding him for his twisted attitude— she would be glad if something so simple could let him vent his frustration. Because he had every reason to exact a graver revenge against the Empire.

「I won’t seek revenge. That’s not scientific, and I promised my mother.」

Ikuta who was lying down closed the book he was reading and stood up.

「Alright, now’s a good time, let’s go out to play.」

The youth who has great memory will learn bad habits whenever he visits any rowdy places. Today too, he and Yatori visited a casino in disguise.

「Oh～Oh～ There’s so many people.」

There were many tables in the wide room, and groups of various, age, gender and body sizes were swamping them. Cheers and screaming rises and falls, and the curses of the losers never stopped. The smog from the patrons’ cigarettes covered the place in a white mist.

「This is a great place. Just breathing the air here makes me feels like I’m deviating from the right path in life.」

「Nice joke. I don’t know how narrow the correct path in life seems to you, but if you can deviate from it this easily, I won’t be having such a hard time. Even if that path is just a hair wide, you will still walk right on it.」

The youth sighed intentionally and surveyed the room.

「All the games had been set to favor the house. Even with that in mind, it's still fine to enjoy a match, but I'm not in the mood for that today. Since you are joining me, let's play something more exciting.」

After that opening line, Ikuta pressed his hat down and turned his gaze:

「The target is over there, that table by the wall with poker cards. Just watch from the corner of your eyes for now.」

Yatori observed the table he was gesturing at with his eyes for almost ten minutes. The youth then asked:

「… What are your thoughts?」

「It's cheating. The dealer is in cahoots with one of the patron.」

The girl answered immediately. Her crimson eyes watched the game progress with a gaze that was sharper than a razor.

「His shuffling looks odd. He probably pulled something to deal good cards to his companions.」

「With your eyes, you can get a job here as a bouncer.」

The youth smiled wryly at that, then explained:

「In any case, as you can see, that man had used the same technique to cheat tens of people recently. His conning skills is just normal, but he is good at keeping his mark. He won't clean them out completely, and keep coercing them to stay. He depends mainly on the glib of his tongue and keeps a low profile, so it's hard to see through him.」

Stopping here for now, Ikuta leaned to the girl's ear and whispered:

「I want to make that guy pay for our drinks tonight, what say you?」

I see, Yatori thought in her heart. This was playing with fire, but he wants to do it in such a way?

「… I’m in. But don’t drag the other patrons in.」

An excitement she hadn’t felt for four years welled up in her chest, and the vermillion haired girl accepted without any hesitation. The youth nodded with a smile:

「Got it. Your style is my style, so let’s just take two plump fish from the pond.」

Ikuta then spent ten minutes to explain the detailed rules, and Yatori grasped the sequence of events by observing the game. She understood the detail in no time.

When they were ready, they saw the people playing cards at the table leave. Ikuta seized this chance and said:

「The table is open. Alright then— mission start.」

「Here, cheers.」

The porcelain cups clanked as they clink them together. After completing their 「mission」 in the casino, they entered a bar and sat down at a table. They sipped on alcoholic beverages and conversed cheerfully:

「That was fun. But the opponent this time is too weak.」

「He turns fragile once his defence line got broken through. He probably never imagined that someone would mark him.」

「Instead of saying that, the credit lies with your sharp eyes. After you saw through the timing of his cheating move, he had to give in. Towards the end, you even knew what cards he was dealing out, right?」

The adrenaline from their victory made them talk more, and they chatted on eagerly.

「What about you, keeping track of which of the 177 cards from 3 decks have been dealt from the very start, and still pretending to be retarded, how evil. When you lost intentionally and pretended to bang the table in anger, I had to hold back my laughter.」

「To bait the opponent into being careless, we have to make them think we are easy pickings. Want me to teach you the trick of pretending to be retarded?」

「I can tell by watching. Simply put, just act emotionally by the things happening before you, correct?」

Her straight talking tickled the youth. Seeing him empty his cup in between their conversation, Yatori changed the topic:

「Before you get drunk, my father has a message for you. 『Are you facing any inconvenience in your life?』.」

Ikuta grinned, then raised the glass in his right hand:

「I'm living the good life on government funding!」

When she heard that obtuse answer, Yatori sighed— with permission from the youth, she had reported Ikuta's situation to her father.

The two of them already agreed that Solvenares Igsem wasn't the one who sent men to apprehend Ikuta. Instead, he belonged to the faction that worked hard to protect Bada's wife and son. Feeling relieved once again that her father wasn't hated, the vermillion haired girl nodded.

「I will tell him that— Furthermore, he suggested adopting you.」

When they got into the main topic, the youth stopped moving his hands mid meal.

「… Is he serious?」

「I have never seen my father crack jokes before.」

Yatori stated it as an indisputable fact. The girl then explained further to Ikuta, who looked as if he just saw a ghost.

「This suggestion isn't that strange. You are Uncle Bada's son, a long time friend of my father. He has close enough relation and good enough reason to adopt you. You don't have to worry, there's nothing strange going on behind the scene.」

「I'm not talking about that… By the way, has the Igsem ever adopted sons before?」

「Yes, but usually as an adopted son-in-law.」

Ikuta almost spat out his wine. Yatori looked at the youth coughing hard and continued nonchalantly:

「Don't worry, I'm not proposing a marriage this time. I'm asking if you want to become a child of my clan.」

「… Wouldn't that put your father in a difficult position? I'm the son of a war criminal, you know?」

「That's why he will want to adopt you. My father wants to revitalize the Sankrei bloodline in the military. He probably wants you to fill in the gap left after Uncle Bada died. That will be in the future though.」

「Dad's achievement has nothing to do with my abilities. It's impossible for me to fill in for him.」

「You are probably the only one who thinks that.」

Ikuta turned silent with a sour face. Taking care to give a fair explanation, the vermillion haired girl added:

「That might be so— but just as you feared, there are downsides too. If you join the Igsem house, you have to live as an Igsem. You won't be forced to learn dual wielding from scratch, but as a member of the clan, you have no options other than living the life of a soldier.」

Yatori didn't mince her words. The youth shook his head slowly after listening to that:

「… Becoming your family is an enticing offer, but I will refuse.」

「Rejection on the spot, huh. Maybe I should save that last part of the explanation for after the adoption papers are done?」

The girl joked, and Ikuta shrugged with a wry smile:

「You aren't running some sort of unethical business racket. If your clan went that far to recruit me, it would be my honour.」

「If possible, I very much would like to recruit you. I feel the same way as you… But I know you will turn me down.」

Yatori said as she took a sip. Their conversation on the topic of adoption was like a set of predetermined set moves. The youth stared at the girl.

「I told you before, Yatori. I'm here to abduct you. If I join the Igsem house, I won't be able to realize my primary goal.」

「I knew you would say that… Sigh~ I got dumped.」

「When I invited you to be scientists together, didn't you dump me too? Right back at you.」

When that topic concluded, the two of them smiled at each other and clinked their glasses.

「To commemorate this match ending in a draw—」「Cheers.」



Unlike their time on the streets, on the surface, the two of them had nothing in common in school.

The studious Yatori and Ikuta who put all his effort into slacking off, were on opposite ends of the student's evaluation. The only thing similar about them was how famous they were in school. So they didn't have to meet, and could learn about each other through the vineyard news.

「I heard Yatorishino-san took first place by a large margin in the exams again.」

「Ikuta got into trouble in Larnee sensei's lessons again.」

News of these two would update often, and sometimes, they would even know what the other was doing in real time. It was no different from them studying in the same classroom.

「I heard you stripped naked in Larnee sensei's class?」

「That old man would touch the body of girls when he explain the joints and muscles of a body, so I volunteered to be the model. By the way, I didn't take off my underwear.」

Including the way the news got exaggerated, Ikuta and Yatori enjoyed this situation. Their strong nerves and the way they weren't fazed by being the centre of attention was a unique quality possessed by the both of them.

「Matthew went to challenge Yatorishino again.」

「And she beat him off handedly. It always ends in the same way, he never learns at all.」

Other names would get mentioned in these news. The most common was definitely Matthew Tetzirich, of all the people that challenged the impregnable fortress known as Yatorishino Igsem, he was especially tenacious.

「Hey, Yatorishino! Let's have a match for the next Military history test!」

「I don’t mind, but it will be wiser to challenge me to maths and science subjects instead. I don’t think I will make any mistakes in problems requiring memorization.」

Yatori handled the relentless challenge easily and displayed the dignity of a victor, reigning supreme in all the school subjects. Matthew had never won before, but another person got intrigued by his losing streak. That was Ikuta Solork.

「Hey, that plump youth over there, I have something to tell you.」

「Who are you calling plump? I’m busy, so don’t bother me!」

「Okay, okay～ don’t be so cold, this isn’t anything bad. I just want to give you the strength you need to win against Yatori, as you have been trying to do so tenaciously all this time.」

「When someone who just sleeps and skip lessons say that, it just sound like a scam!」

After challenging the top model student for some time, he was harassed by the number one problem child in the school, which confused Matthew. In contrast to his confusion, Ikuta liked Matthew. Matthew was one of the few people the youth would take the initiative to talk to.

Ever since he enrolled, Ikuta had avoided making close friends in school. Yatori understood that as being just natural, since Ikuta planned to leave the Empire one day— And that made how eager Ikuta approached the slightly pudgey youth more prominent. One day after school, she tried asking for the reason:

「I want to ask you something, why are you harassing Matthew Tetzirich? Is teasing him fun?」

The youth who was playing with a cat that wandered into school answered without any hesitation:

「That’s part of it, but the biggest reason is that he won’t submit to you. Even after failing so many times and understanding the gulf between you and him, he didn’t lose the will to fight, or allow his heart to get twisted from jealousy and sabotage you. That is really exemplary of him, and I sincerely respect his tenacious spirit.」

It was rare for him to be so serious, and he turned to Yatori.

「You should realize how precious he is. Those who give up on challenging you will savor the comfortable taste of submission, and will rely on you even more in the future. When you fall into a dire straits one day, that sort of person will never help you. Instead of yes man, your competitive rivals will be more reliable.」

Ikuta’s advice made Yatori stroke her chin in deep thought:

「You will only understand the importance of your rival when you lose them… Is that what you mean?」

「It’s a big problem because you are so outstanding. If you understand, then give Matthew props from time to time, and let him take the honor— I won’t demand too much, but acknowledge his efforts from time to time. Try not to hold the attitude of being above him.」

She tried to follow that advice in her mind, but it was really hard to do that against this stubborn schoolmate of hers. Especially the part about not being above him.

「I’m not confident, but I will try to keep that in mind… Now that I think about it, I didn’t expect that from you. Aren’t you planning to take me away from the Empire?」

Ikuta’s hand that was teasing the cat froze, and he crossed his arms with a troubled face:

「… That’s the problem. If I invite Matthew, will he come with me?
」

Yatori laughed at his meek question. He would leave one day— but this youth wasn't smart or heartless enough to reject interactions with the people before him.

「Back to the topic— Speaking of a rival, I also want to tell a certain someone. The quickest method is for you to get serious.」

「It's difficult to skip lessons and avoid failing too.」

Their sighs overlapped each other. The cat that had grown tired from playing laid on the ground to sun tan.

Another day, Yatori headed to the 「nest」 deep within the woods on campus, and opened her eyes wide.

「— That's really swollen, what happened?」

「… I was drinking tea with a beautiful lady, then her husband appeared suddenly… and punched me.」

The right side of the youth's face lying in a hammock was completely swollen. Something similar happened in the past too, which made the vermillion haired girl tilted her head puzzledly:

「You definitely deserved it… You can keep your other bad habits in check, but why are you so clumsy with regards to women?」

「… I'm not sure. I don't know when it started… whenever I see the lonely older woman by herself, my body will just move on its own.」

「That doesn't sound healthy. Or rather, did you like older women in the past too?」

When she said that, Yatori understood from her instincts what prompted his urges. It's because an older woman he wanted to protect had already passed on.

「… Anyway, don't commit adultery. You will get knifed one day if you did that.」

After reminding him to not cross the minimal line, she ended the topic. It was up to the subject himself to decide how he would face his wounds.

Their daily lives continued with many tribulations.

At times, they would set a trap to deceive a conman that sells fake jewelries—

Or send a notorious bandit gang into prison after an intense struggle—

Uncovering the corruption of a government official with evidence—

Rescue 17 children abducted by human traffickers and return them to their parents.

And of course, not all of these incidents have a happy ending. When Ikuta proposed a 「mission」, there would be a heavy theme behind it.

The flaws in the social system. Abuse of authority and graft. The decline of industrial production. Exploitation by the upper classes. These incidents revealed the truth behind the Empire, and this was just the tip of the iceberg— with the dark haired youth as the guide, Yatori experienced first hand the true extent of the corruption that she had a faint inking of in her daily life.

「The worst thing isn't the corruption, but the lack of a brake system to keep them in check.」

One evening, the youth said as he watched the city from the top of the school building. Yatori listened as she looked down at the same scene.

「The ironic thing is, the complacency of the royals and nobles stemmed from their trust of the military. Before things get out of hand, the soldiers would sort it out— with that in mind, they would continue governing with impunity until they are forced to face the music. Because they only have their own self interest in mind.」

Ikuta explained how hopeless this nation was with a heavy tone.

「There isn’t anyone in this country that could point out how retarded this was. Even if they could see it, no one can play this role. Most of the soldiers execute orders from the cabinet with Igsem leading them, but they couldn’t highlight the inadequacies of the orders. Questioning these orders would be overstepping their authority— this value was deeply rooted in their mind.」

His dark eyes stared at the city before him. Large numbers of pedestrians on their way home swarmed the roads that had been dyed red by the sun.

「The commoners think they are not qualified to participate in politics. To them, talking about politics is like chatting about the weather, they can only accept when it rains or snows. And the people also think the same thing— if something major happens, the soldiers will take care of it for them.」

This fact made the youth sighed, and he continued:

「If you think about this situation, there are only two fates awaiting the Empire. Destruction brought about by corruption, or a revolution to end the rot. Either commit suicide together with the system, or destroy the system and reinstate a new one.」

With these two cruel choices laid out, Ikuta stared at the girl beside him with a strong gleam.

「You already understand, Yatori. The Igsem will fall in either path. This is obvious if the Empire perish, but even if the country is reborn with a new establishment, your clan, which is the old guard of the previous establishment, will be the first to be purged. It will be a different matter if your clan is flexible enough to adapt to the new situation. It’s obvious your clan can’t do that, since the country isn’t ruled by a military junta now.」

Yatori stayed silent. She couldn’t refute anything the youth said.

「Destruction is inevitable for your clan. Since I know that, I can't let you stay here.

… So, come away with me. Discard the Igsem name that bonds you to the Empire, and live freely as just Yatorishino— live together with me in this big wide world.」

The youth issued the same invitation he stated in their childhood, with long years of pent-up emotions behind his words.

Despite knowing how sincere his request was, the vermillion haired girl shook her head.

「Abandoning the Empire to save my own skin… That's your request?」

「Yes, that's my request. If you don't run now, this country will ruin you.

When you care for the nation more than anyone else, and fought with all your heart and is exhausted and scarred— you will fail to resolve this flaw, and realize all your efforts are futile… Just imagining your life ending this way makes me go insane.」

The youth groaned as he seethed from anger. After being exploited, she would die without having her efforts rewarded— Ikuta couldn't help overlapping the girl's future with the fate of countless heroes from the past.

「… Some times, I wonder. Do I actually believe— that you will accept this request one day, where I can take you away from the Empire.」

His listless voice disappeared into the air. With the evening sun as the backdrop, his bluff could be seen through easily.

「I'm so vexed, Yatori. I could see how you would meet your demise, but I can't think up a concrete plan for your salvation—」

Let's just go shopping normally for today, Ikuta proposed. There were things the two of them could do at any time, but had not tried before.

「I had always thought that you should dress up properly if the chance arises. That would definitely be fun.」

On the youth's request, they visited a famous tailor shop in the area. As they browsed the clothing displayed on poles, sewn together with cloth of various colors, Yatori looked a little baffled.

「Hmm…? Personally, I don't see the point of non functional clothes.」

「I respect your opinion, but let's not debate this today. Dressing up starts by sacrificing function for the sake of form— Hey, shop owner!」

Ikuta clapped, and a lady in elegant clothes walked over briskly.

「… As expected of Ikuta. You brought a lovely lady over today.」

「Long time no see, Sheui. As promised, I'm here as a customer today.」

「I have been waiting. That means— this is the Yatori-chan I have been hearing about.」

Sheui approached Yatori curiously, and spent some time checking her out.

「I see… this is definitely a top class unpolished gem. It would be worth the effort to dress her up.」

「I brought the best diamond in the world here, so go all out, Sheui.」

「That's what I want to hear. Come, both of you.」

Ikuta and Yatori followed the owner on her gesture, going deep inside the store.

「By the way Yatori-chan, how long have you known Ikuta?」

After picking out some clothes, Yatori separated from the youth temporary, and was brought to the fitting room. She put on the dress and chatted with Sheui through the curtains.

「I only knew him for a few years. Sheui-san, how did you get acquainted with Ikuta?」

「When I was drinking at the bar, he tried to pick me up. I was confused at the start. After all… He is a boy in his teens, while I'm almost 40.」

Yatori felt the texture of the clothes, and was surprised by what she heard.

「Sheui-san looks much younger than that.」

「Fufu, thank you. I'm the owner of a clothing shop after all, so it will affect my business if I didn't look young.」

Sheui answered and continued the conversation:

「Back to Ikuta, youthful appearances aside, he seemed to have dated older women in the past… It might sound strange for me to say this, doesn't it make you uneasy?」

Sheui asked for her opinion, and the girl nodded without any hesitation:

「His face was swollen some time ago, I heard he got punched by the husband of someone he flirted with.」

「Ahaha, that did happen. It's good Ikuta got off easy with a beating, it would be terrible if he got stabbed or something.」

Sheui said with a smile, then her tone suddenly turned serious.

「However— I think that child has a messy youth. Liking older women is fine… but it seems more serious for Ikuta.」

Yatori stopped her hands that were picking the clothes. The frail face of Yuka Sankrei flashed across her mind, and a mixture of nostalgia and pain tore at her heart.

「… You are probably right.」

「I know, right? I can feel that he is chasing after the shadow of someone. Ikuta doesn't really like older woman, but someone else… Sigh, but it's not convenient for me to probe too deeply.」

She sighed after saying that, and stared at the girl behind the curtain. Yatori could sense what she was doing too. A while later, Sheui said:

「But… right. To be honest, I'm relieved that you came here. Because Ikuta is looking straight at you, and not seeing the shadow of someone through you. From what I know, you are the only exception for him.」

That was the first time someone commented on her relationship with the youth in such a way. Yatori felt a little bashful, and sensing that the conversation was at an end, she started putting on her dress. Sheui voice came from behind the curtain one last time.

「He said he brought the best diamond in the world here. I'm envious—」

「How does it look? I match the entire set.」

Sheui lead the girl by the hand and walked to the youth sitting in a chair. When he turned his head, time froze for Ikuta.

She was wearing a Sari dress that covered her entire body. The top half was a tight fitting blouse that emphasize her breasts and waist. The long skirt was a matured reddish brown, paired with slippers. The colors brought out the girl's charm nicely, and wasn't too loud either.

「Well? I did heed your advice, and didn't consider the functionality of the clothing.」

Yatori asked with a hand on the thin and smooth clothing. But after waiting for a while, the youth still didn't speak.

「— Ah— Erm, ehh—」

Realizing the reason why Ikuta was dumbfounded, Sheui smiled smugly.

「Looks like I defended the honor of my shop.」

After satisfying her pride as an expert, the shop owner went around and pushed the two of them from behind:

「Alright— since you are all dressed up, go out and have fun. This isn't your only destination for today, right? Then walk around while the day's still bright.」

「Ah, Sheui, payment for the clothes—」

「No need, this is a present.」

Ikuta stared with his eyes wide at that nonchalant reply:

「N-No no— this is all top quality goods right?」

He said as he looked at the girl's clothes. Yatori who thought the same thing wanted to speak too, but was stopped by Sheui who raised a hand. She said with a brilliant smile:

「Like I said, this is a present— to the first girl my son brought home.」

That stopped all the objections, and the two were pushed out of the tailor shop.

「… What did you and Sheui talked about while I was waiting?」

The two of them walked in the crowded street, and the youth asked as he was bothered by the conversation from earlier. Yatori didn't hide anything and answered:

「We basically talked about your fetish for women. She is worried about you, and thinks it's not healthy for you to only target older women.」

「I didn't expect… Sigh, I have no words.」

Ikuta fell silent with a complicated expression. Not knowing what to say next, he forcefully changed the topic.

「Well then, let’s have some wholesome fun today. Are you hungry?」

「I am, let’s grab a bite.」

「Then I will buy something from a stall nearby. I’ll be back in a jiffy, wait here for me.」

「I can queue together with you.」

「You can’t do that now. You don’t want to dirty your new clothes right?」

Ikuta said with an awkward smile. Yatori looked down at her new clothes and frowned.

「… It is lacking in functionality.」

「That might be true, but I’m happy to see you dress up so nicely.
」

The youth had an innocent smile, and could finally express his feelings honestly. Yatori watched him go with a warm feeling in her chest.

She had to wait for him to come back, but it would be unnecessarily prominent to just stand there. The girl walked to a stall nearby, planning to kill time by browsing the merchandize.

「H-Honey, there’s a customer!」 「W-Welcome…!」

The moment she stood before a store facing the street, a young married couple rushed up to her. Yatori was surprised by their eagerness, and the husband started introducing his wares.

「What do you think? This is trending clothes from Tatsuku! Its colors suit you well!」

He took the most prominent roll of cloth in the shop and showed it to his customer. Without waiting for a response, he did the same thing with another merchandize.

「How about this one? The patterns are a little bold, but for a beautiful lady like you, anything will look good… Hahaha!」

Yatori took the Tatsuku cloth shoved into her hands, and her face turned tense. The married couple didn't notice and took out other merchandize.

「— Sorry for the intrusion.」

A hoarse and intimidating voice boomed into the store. The couple stopped with a shiver, and turned around stiffly.

「B-Befork san…」

「Yo, shopkeep. You got the money ready?」

The man named Befork with a scary face entered the shop with several of his henchmen behind him. The young couple averted their faces, afraid of looking him in the eye.

「E-Erm… J-Just wait a little while longer! We will get the money in a few more days! L-Look, Befork-san, the goods you sold us is being sold little by little…!」

「Are you kidding me, I gave you the ultimatum three days ago!」

Befork ignored these excuses and roared. The shopkeeper's knees turned weak and he fell onto his butt.

「Since you can't return the money, then we will take the building as per the contract— Hey, you lot.」

On his command, his henchmen attempted to enter the shop, some of them even had tools to demolish the shop. They probably intended to recover the valuables in the shop and tear it down, their movements were rushed and violent.

「S-Stop!」 「Shop! Our shop!」

That couple held each other as they cried. Yatori stood before the two of them and said loudly:

「… Please wait. I have something to clarify with you.」

「What is it? Little miss, this has nothing to do with the patrons, please stand aside.」

「I want to do that too, but I'm puzzled by the fact that you are taking the shop just three days after your ultimatum. According to the provincial debt collection laws, you can only do so after one week.」

The girl stated her knowledge of the law. Befork frowned with a fierce glare.

「… Hah? If I wait four days, and those two flee in the middle of the night, will you take responsibility then, little miss?」

「If that really happens, you won't lose anything except for time. From the beginning when you proposed that loan, your target is this piece of land, right?」

Yatori stood steadfast and retaliated. Befork started to sneer:

「… Mind your own business, little miss. Listen, I gave a loan to that stupid couple over there, and the contract states they have to return the loan to me with interest by the end of last month. But they didn't cough up the money. So I'm here to take this shop that has been used as collateral, as per the contract. There's no need to complicate matters further.」

「You don't want them to clear the debt from the start, right? Since you arrange for this shop to sell such substandard wares.」

The girl showed the cloth she presented to her and said. The shopkeeper just said that these were the people who supplied these goods to them.

「The specialty from the south, Tatsuku cloth— it's true that it is trending recently. Because of that, there are many nefarious people who want to make a killing by selling fakes with similar patterns. What an annoying coincidence, I dealt with a gang that did this recently.」

The man's face turned blank. The young couple opened their eyes wide after hearing that.

「… Huh? F-Fake? This…?」

「I'm not an expert, but the structure of the patterns is clearly not right, and I don't see the most prominent part of Tatsuku cloth, which is its artistic diagonal lines. I saw the real thing in another shop just now, so this sense of wrongness is even stronger. Displaying such wares won't increase your sales. The seller is just dumping their excess goods onto you.」

Seeing that the couple running a shop here didn't have eyes for goods, they loaned the couple money— seeing the exploitative structure of the entire thing, Yatori placed the cloth back onto the rack. Befork bared his crooked teeth in a smile.

「Hah— So what? That stupid couple just doesn't have sharp enough eyes. Business is war, little girl. The one who misjudged the values of the good is in the wrong.」

「I'm an amateur, so I can't refute that. Pushing for early repayment of debt might be a feasible method in the commercial world… But you have also admitted that you gave your ultimatum three days ago. They still have four days of grace period.」

「Damn you, watch it—」

Frustrated by the long argument, one of the henchmen reached forth to grab the girl. She quickly lock his arm in a standing position.

「Shyaa…?」

「If you going to break the laws so overtly, I can't overlook this. Come again four days later. This is the law you must follow.」

Yatori pushed the screaming man out of the shop and expressed her unwavering will to her opponents. Pissed off by the little girl who was belittling them, the henchmen went forth one after another. But

when the second got kicked in the balls, and the third got thrown out, Befork's face turned pale.

「Hey— stop.」

He restrained his triggered henchmen, and glared at the girl. At this point, he realized that fighting any longer would just result in more casualties.

「… Since it has come to this, I don't mind coming back another day.」

Befork retracted his words, and the couple behind Yatori looked happy.

「But— putting aside reason, there is the matter of our reputation to settle. You got that. You lot, do it.」

The group rushed outside the shop on command, and a few minutes later, gathered all the buckets of kitchen waste from the vicinity, and gathered back before the shop.

「——!」

With Yatori's abilities, it was easy to dodge, but the couple behind her was a bondage to her feet. If she dodged, it would splash onto them— With that thought in mind, she made her choice.

The kitchen waste was thrown out. Leftover vegetables, bones with rotten meat, brownish fruit skin and goo that was impossible to identify— all that splashed onto the girl mercilessly.

Until the wave stopped, she didn't move an inch. Yatori looked terrible after everything was over. Her beautiful translucent sari, the smooth shirt under it and the high cut and elegant skirt— Sheui's well meaning gifts were completely ruined by the kitchen waste.

「Hee! — Looks good on you.」

Befork sneered gleefully at her sullied sight.

「Just take this as a warning before we come to take the shop. There are four days left, if you can still do business like this, and do what you want.」

「……」

「Your pretty clothes are all ruined, little girl. If you learned your lesson, then don't — Fuwahh?」

The man was about to turn and leave after venting his anger, when a round object hit him in the face.

「I-I-It burns—?」

It was a bread covered in melted cheese. The gooey cheese stuck onto his skin, and the searing heat made Befork groped at his face.

「Water water! Give me water!」

「Here, water.」

A bottle was shoved into his hand groping for help, and thinking nothing aside from escaping the burning sensation on his face, Befork poured the content onto his head. The spicy content splashed onto him mercilessly.

「Shyyaaa! What is this, it stings! My eyes are burning～～!」

「D-Damn you!」　「What did you do to the boss!」

All this happened too smoothly, and Befork's henchmen only started acting now. The youth who had a headstart ran around to escape their grasps. The pedestrians stared in awe as the group chased each other in the streets. But it didn't last long as the blinded Befork sought the help of his henchmen.

「I-I can't see…! You lot, help me! Where's the well!」

「B-But boss…」　「That brat is still…」

「I'm telling you to help me! Damn it～～ my face hurts～～!」

With a deep bellow, Befork staggered away, led by his henchmen. After seeing them go, the youth rushed into the shop, and saw the terrible state of the vermillion haired girl.

「… Ikuta…」

Yatori felt a stabbing pain in her chest when she saw his eyes go wide. Not because of how unsightly she was, but because the youth would feel hurt when he sees her like this.

The moment he stopped, Ikuta decided on the next course of action and execute it. He picked up the bucket of kitchen waste and pour it over his head. The vermillion haired girl gasped, and was dumbfounded.

After sullying himself like Yatori, he pulled the girl to him by the arm, picked up a banana peel with his other hand and threw it into the shop with all his might. The young couple was shocked by that and yelled:

「Uwah! W-What are you doing!」

「This trash should have been splashed onto you!」

Ikuta drowned out their protest with a yell, and left. Yatori kept her head low as she followed quietly.

Ikuta brought the girl with soiled clothes to the best inn in the vicinity. When they passed through the entrance of the brick building, the owner receive them with a puzzled face. The youth demanded without any hesitation:

「There's a public bath here, right!? I want to rent the place immediately.」

「We do have one—」

After confirming that, Ikuta took out his wallet. The money he got from tricking other con men were in there. He picked out about a dozen note, and handed them to the owner.

「I will rent the bath for an hour with this money. You don't have to prepare hot water, but give me as much water as possible! And also soap and balm! I'm fine with simple indoor clothes, please prepare two sets for me! As soon as possible!」

「Y-Yes!」

The owner probably thought of them as eccentric guests, and acted quickly after taking the money. He brought them to the bath immediately, and the two of them stood before the rinsing point in the empty bathhouse, with buckets of water to clean themselves.

「I asked the owner to prepare some simple clothes, so take off your soiled ones. Want me to turn around?」

「It's fine. Besides, you should take yours off too.」

「Yes… that's true. I'm stripping too.」

They nodded at each other, placed their partner sprites onto the floor, and took all their clothes off. They had no qualms about being naked in front of each other, and this day felt like an extension of the times they spent together four years ago.

「I will pour water onto your head, it will be a bit cold.」

「Yes, it's fine.」

Yatori nodded, and the youth slowly scooped up water to rinse her body. Feeling the filth washed away from her body, the girl looked to the clothes she took off earlier.

「… I got it stained with kitchen waste in less than an hour, I wonder how I should apologize to Sheui.」

「We can always make new clothes, what's important now is your body.」

After repeatedly rinsing away the obvious filth, the youth put down the bucket, and picked up the soap and towel he got from the owner. He placed a bottle of balm by his feet, soaked the towel in water, and lather it with soap.

「If you leave it alone for too long, the rotten stench of the kitchen waste would be hard to get off. Before using the balm, you will need to wash it yourself carefully with soap, especially your hair.」

「Yes, got it… by the way, Ikuta.」

「Yes, what is it?」

After taking the towel covered in soap, the vermillion haired girl lowered her gaze and apologized softly.

「… Sorry for ruining the clothes.」

When he heard that, the youth grit his teeth loudly. He was frustrated that she had to apologize. He had never seen Yatori so depressed since the first time they met.

As he lathered more soap, Ikuta said firmly:

「There is only one thing I want to say. There isn't anything in this world that you need to apologize for.」

「I'm done… How is it?」

The youth and the girl were brought to a room after cleansing themselves, and sat shoulder to shoulder on one of the beds, wearing indoor robes. On Yatori's request, Ikuta leaned close to the body of the vermillion haired girl and sniffed.

「… Hmm, it's good. There's only the smell of balm and your own nice scent.」

「I see, that's great— next is your turn.」

The girl nodded with a smile, grabbed Ikuta's shoulder and leaned in to check his smell too. She frowned:

「…? There's no stench of kitchen waste, but what's this? Smell like roasted leaves…」

「Oh, that's probably the lingering smell from my visit to the tobacco shop two days ago. I got cocky and inhaled quite a bit of it.」

「You picked up more bad habits? I think you are getting addicted to them.」

Yatori said with a bewildered face, but didn't pull her face away. Ikuta retaliated by tickling her armpits, and for a while, the two of them played around like intimate puppies.

「… How did you get involved with those people?」

The sunlight shining through the windows grew dim, and the youth laid down beside the girl on the bed and asked. Yatori recounted everything about the incident before that shop, including the background. After hearing everything, Ikuta's face turned gloomy.

「The landlord pushing for repayment ahead of the deadline… They are scum just like I thought. But that couple is bad too, they are too inattentive and trusting, so half of their troubles is their own doing.」

「I feel the same way. Even without the debtors rushing for repayment early, that shop won't last long.」

「Then just leave them be. They are just losing the shop four days early.」

In contrast to his cold way of putting it, he was worried about the girl. Yatori smiled when she sensed that, but still shook her head.

「Things might be different with four days. It will be enough for them to pack their bags, and prepare themselves mentally for their next phase of life. This buffer time is a right granted to them by the law. So I have to defend that right— That's what I thought back then, and my body acted first.」

Her way of life had not changed since four years ago. Ikuta grit his teeth with a bitter face.

「… As a result, you got splashed with filth.」

「It got on you too.」

「Of course. How can I let you get humiliated alone!?」

The youth raised his voice and sat up. He looked at Yatori with a sad face.

「… If you encounter the same thing, will you stand up for others again?」

「I think so. Protecting lives and properties of the citizen is the duty of a soldier— of an Igsem.」

「Even if the thing splashed onto you… isn't kitchen waste, but bullets?」

「I will still step up. Doing so will protect the most number of people.」

「……!」

He already knew that. Ikuta understood the vermillion haired girl's way of life better than anyone, and how precious she was, that she would never change from the day he met her.

That was why he couldn't stand it at this moment— When he heard her answer, the youth lost his self control.

「— It's because— you are like this!」

Compelled by his despair— the next moment, he pinned the girl below him.

「……Ikuta?」

Yatori looked baffledly at the youth before her.

「——」

His hands were on the sheets above her shoulders, and Ikuta said with gloomy eyes:

「— Since I can't bend your will— I will bind you instead.」

「……」

「There's a saying that a child is a wedge, which means the existence of a child maintains the feelings between married couples. I always hated that way of putting it… But looking at it from the other

way, that means the bonds are so weak that it will break without the child, right?」

The youth said detestedly, then showed a self mocking smile.

「I hate it— but I'm desperate enough to use that. I can't help thinking, if I can convince you with a wedge, then I will use any despicable method that I can.」

Their faces were close enough to feel each other's breath, and he finally said the decisive line:

「Right here, and now, I will impregnate you.」

「—」

Thump! The girl's heart pounded hard. With their eyes locked together, the youth squeezed out his voice and continued:

「This is the worst method I can think of. I was impressed by how stupid this method is. But, but— it might work. The unfavorable conditions and scandal will force you away from the path of the soldier.」

Ikuta couldn't stop his voice from trembling. He understood how foolish his action was, a vulgar act of an unscrupulous beast— however, he didn't have any other options. No matter how he tried, the youth couldn't find any way to take the vermillion haired girl away from the Empire, and separate her life from that of an Igsem.

「The scandal of unwed pregnancy, and cast aside from the path of a soldier and an Igsem— will you come with me then? Even if you hate me and bear a grudge… will you live on as just Yatorishino? And leave behind your fate of dying together with the Empire?」

The fingers on his right hand sunk into the girl's shoulder. Her robes were open, revealing her delicate skin, and exposing her bountiful breasts. However, Yatori didn't move. Her crimson eyes showed no sign of rejection as she looked straight at him.

「— Push me away, Yatori. You understand, right? I'm being crazy right now.」

Ikuta was the one who pleaded for help. The girl finally answered quietly:

「… I already thought about it. If that really happened, how I will live my life.」

「……」

「After being impregnated with your child, the news will spread, and I will either withdraw from school temporarily, or for good— the tribulations will continue even after giving birth. I can't predict how my father will act, or what the main house will do to me. Disowning me is easy, but the Igsem lacks an heir… They might even accept me along with the scandals.」

Yatori described the future she imagined in detail. As she imagined the days that might be, she soon arrived at an answer.

「But all those are just trivial details. I realized as I imagine all this— even if that happens, I won't stop being an Igsem.」

The vermillion haired girl said with a pain that tore at her chest. Because she was aware that this answer would deepen the youth's despair.

「It would take two years at most for my body to recover enough to resume schooling. I never cared much about my reputation— and having a child with you isn't a scandal to me. I will be swamped with raising the child and my busy schedule, but the Igsem main house will probably help too. That child is a precious heir, and compared to the flawed me, they will take more care in nurturing that child— Oh, or you want to raise that child? Then convincing the main house will be difficult…」

Yatori said calmly, with a sense of powerlessness in her heart. Why couldn't she say something more apt for the situation? No, she should say something to respond to his feelings, instead of all this.

「But, no matter what— that child won't become the wedge that you want. Your wish of taking me away from the Empire won't come true. So this method is a failure from the start… Even so, there's something I want to tell you.」

She finally thought of something that could answer his feelings. This fact made her relieved, and she said with a smile:

「I will definitely give birth and raise that child. No matter what anyone says, I will not abort my pregnancy. You don't have to worry about that.」

Complicated feelings wavered in Ikuta's dark eyes. Her fingers brushed against the cheeks of the youth, and Yatori relaxed her body and closed her eyes.

「I won't push you away. I'm the one who made you insane in the first place. If you are going to do it— be gentle. This is my first time.
」

It was fine even if this was meaningless. The girl was sure there was a point to this, even if it was meaningless.

As he looked at the girl who had given her consent and closed her eyes— Ikuta breathed out softly.

「… Yatori…」

「What?」

「… You are too mean…」

It was a voice of someone who sounded completely crushed. He stopped pinning her down, and sat down with his back to the girl.

「… I give up, I realized a long time ago that I can't pull you away from the Igsem. That was impossible from the start, and most importantly, I don't want that either.

Because— when we first met, you are already Yatorishino Igsem. That is the perfect and beautiful form of the girl that I consider to be my other half. No matter how stubborn or insane I am, I will never want to … tarnish your very existence.」

Yatori slowly got up behind him. The youth continued.

「I can't accept this fact, and had been lying to myself. Because— I won't be able to move if I did face it. I can solve this problem by taking you away from the Empire, but I will sink into the darkness without finding the solution if I faced that fact. Then what should I do? I want to save you, but I can't even find a way. This is a dead end…」

The girl gently touched his trembling back. There was only one thing she could say.

「I have you. There's no greater salvation for me than that.」

The youth shook his head like a stubborn child, refusing to accept this conclusion.

「Don't give in. We are both too young to treat a dead end alley as a paradise—」

A few days later, after morning classes were over, Yatori headed deep into the 「nest」 in the forest to search for the youth. Ikuta who was in his hammock as usual glanced at her, then said unhappily with a pout:

「— I have reviewed my strategy.」

He started with the conclusion. The girl waited under the hammock.

「The goal of pulling you away from the Igsem is wrong. I have to admit, that I can't bring Yatorishino alone from the Empire. It will be pointless if the one I take with me isn't Yatorishino Igsem.」

The strategic review came too late, the youth grumbled. Yatori nodded seriously.

「Is that so… Then, what will you do?」

Under the watchful gaze of her crimson eyes, Ikuta scratched his cheeks bashfully.

「Well, about that… I don't have a specific plan in mind yet, so I'm giving myself some buffer time. I will be careful and not rush myself, and will use the time until graduation to rework my plan.」

It seems that he had not found a way out of this dead end. Yatori accepted this fact with complicated feelings, then said after hesitating for a few seconds:

「In that case, I have a suggestion.」

「Hmm?」

Ikuta looked stiffly at her. The vermillion haired girl tried her best to stay calm and continued calmly:

「You know about the officer cadet selection test two years later, right? I plan to participate, but according to the rumours, the Remeon house will send a strong competitor for that year.」

In contrast to the stagnant guilt in her heart, the lines she prepared flowed out smoothly. She always felt that was the uncute part about her, and she never stuttered at all.

「As the daughter of the Igsem house, I have to get top candidate medal. So I want to borrow your strength. The written test portion is fine, but the second phase will be a competition between the candidates. I want to find a ringer to give me the edge in the exam.
」

Yatori stopped after saying that, and Ikuta asked after thinking about it:

「So, you want me to take the exams too?」

「I have prepared a reward for you, of course. I will introduce you to a job in the Empire, within the limits of the Igsem's connections.

You can choose any venue and career as you wish. How about that?
」

The youth thought for a moment, and stated his wish.

「… Even an imperial librarian?」

「I will confirm it again later, but that should be fine. Librarians are viewed as pushover jobs anyway.」

Yatori nodded. After troubling over it for a long while, Ikuta returned his gaze to the girl.

「Then I will accept. It will be some time before I settle on a plan, so having a slack working environment to think it over isn't bad either.」

「It's decided then. Let's have a drink to toast our cooperative relationship?」

The girl took out two wine glasses from the bag on her shoulder, and handed one to Ikuta. She took out a small bottle of wine, which made the youth open his eyes wide.

「… Is it fine? No one else is here, but we are still on campus.」

「I'm proposing a nefarious scheme here, so what's wrong with breaking the rules a little?」

Yatori said mischievously, and poured milky white fruit wine into the glasses.

「I had been poisoned by you and your father so much that I can pull off such a scheme. You also said that you will do everything you can to tempt me to depravity. So to a certain extent, it worked.」

「I see, then all those trips we made to the shady areas were worth it.」

Ikuta got down from his hammock, and smiled boldly. They faced each other in the forest, and raise their glasses high.

「To your depravity and our victory.」

「Yes— Cheers.」

Clink, the glasses clinked hard together. The wine tasted sweet with a bitter aftertaste.

On the way back to the school building through the forest, Yatori thought— it was too obvious that I had ulterior motives.

If he accepted the proposal to assist with the officer cadet selection test, that would mean maintaining Ikuta Solork's connection to the Imperial Army. That would retain the possibility of him joining the military, and recruiting him when a chance arises.

It was obvious that this was the hidden agenda of the Igsem. Their whimsical hope that the Imperial Army could revive the Sankrei line, and find a breath of fresh air to ventilate the stagnant future… The purpose of the Igsem was to stay consistent throughout the times, so they couldn't change anything by themselves. That was why they would reach out unconsciously for someone to lead the revolution. Just like how Bada Sankrei was to Solvenares Igsem.

However— Yatori sighed. Even the Igsem's hidden agenda was just an excuse for her.

Her other half that reunited with her after four years. The youth who stayed in the Empire that had no future just to save her from the fate of destruction. His feelings and actions filled the girl's heart with guilt and glee. Yatorishino could never give up by herself or leave him— even though she knew she couldn't cross that final line in her heart and answer the youth's wishes.

That day when her new clothes were sullied, the youth pinned her down and proclaimed he would impregnate her. Back then, she thought, that was fine too. Even though it was meaningless, it was precious to her as this was the method the youth chose after troubling over it for so long. That might be a terrible method, and would leave a scar— she wanted to embrace that pain.

「In the end— I'm so hopelessly greedy.」

The girl concluded, then stopped and looked up to the sky… Two in one, like a left and right hand. The promise they made were still rooted deep in their hearts, and didn't fade one bit—

「Yes, that's right. So— I won't let this go again.」

— In that instant, the surrounding went dark, and a freezing voice came from behind.

「…?」

Yatori turned around with a chilling feeling in her heart— and stopped breathing.

A vermillion haired figure with dual swords. An Igsem in the same attire as her stood there. However, her crimson eyes had pure murderous lust.

「Good bye, Yatorishino.」

With an icy farewell, that figure drew out her saber and short sword. Before Yatori could react, the two blades pierced her breasts.

「Ah——」

The blade flashed without giving any chance for a scream. Severing the arms, legs, and head. The dual blades cut her to pieces, robbing the very existence of that vermillion haired girl.

But that was just the start. After chopping her beyond recognition, the vermillion haired figure slashed at even more things.

Cutting the rainbow bridge across the sky. The scientists in white smiling gently. The silly smile of Bada Sankrei. The frail smile of Yuka Sankrei. The joy she felt when she stole food from the kitchen. The excitement when she pulled out the lord of the swamp. The debate that turned intense as both sides refused to back down. The frustration of leading a battalion on missions and the glee of achieving the objective. The thrill of the deadly battle with the wolves. The irreplaceable promise she had with her other half.

She severed the memories of the Knight Corp. The taste of Haro's tea that soothe her soul. The respect for Matthew's forthright challenge. The friendship and rivalry she had towards Torway. The grateful feelings she had towards Sazarf. The concern and emotions she invested in Princess Chamille beyond her position as her vassal.

She slashed her feelings for Ikuta. His hopes, frustrations, struggles— everything he said. All the shining things that warm Yatorishino's heart, were all cut up forever.

She gathered all the shreds she cut— and threw them into the fire.

「— Ugh— Ahh—」

As she leaned against the closed furnace door, a part of her burning into ashes suffocates her.

「— Ah— Ahhh—」

The elements that made her human slowly faded away into dust.

The pain was beyond words. The death throes of her soul being ripped apart was the ultimate punishment tormenting her.

She couldn't withstand it. She wanted to scream. If she could cast aside her pride and senses, and reach out for the intense flames— and grab the remnants of everything she discarded, it would be so easy.

But she was not permitted to do so. The obligation she shouldered didn't allowed her to. All her paths had been sealed by blades, with only one left.

The girl closed her eyes and stood before the furnace. Like a criminal whose legs were chained. Like a sword stabbed securely to the ground.

「——」

At the end of the torment that she thought would last forever, she realized— that she was in an empty darkness.

It was over. She realized that her soul had been completely consumed by the flame.

「……」

There was no more pain, and her dead heart was silent. She felt hollow inside.

A voice echoed in that emptiness— Follow your orders, do what you must.

「— Yes.」

The girl nodded stoicly, and opened her eyes. She used the back of her hand to crudely rub away the liquid on the corners of her eyes— that furnace had already disappeared.

In its place was the bed in the corner, a plain chair and desk, and luggage placed neatly around her. The vermillion haired girl turned around quietly in her familiar tent.

「… Yatori…」

Her partner Shia called out to its mistress from the pouch with concern. The girl shook her head.

「That woman is no more.」

She declared with a steel-like voice, and walked to the entrance of the tent. After seeing the emotionless profile of its mistress' face, Shia couldn't say anything else.

The night breeze caressed her cheeks when she was outside. Her tears dried up quickly with that. After completely discarding her humanity, the Igsem that was left marched on forward.

To fulfil her duty. To slay Ikuta Solork.

Chapter 4: Promise

In a shallow cave created by the jutting rocks, all the officers above the rank of First Lieutenant in the 「Rising Sun Regiment」 search team stood in neat ranks.

「I will explain the strategy.」

With the members of the Knight Corps standing beside him, the commander-in-chief Ikuta kicked things off.

「Our entire forces will head into the Kugurosaebo rocky terrain, and deploy our men in suitable places. The rocky hills in this open rocky terrain are tightly packed together— and looks roughly like this.」

He gestured with his gaze, and four soldiers slowly put the long table with a hand drawn map laid on it onto its side. Ikuta pointed to the map and explained its content:

「As you can see, our base consists of eight rocky . Three in the center, and five on the outside, for a total of eight. To make it easy, I will call each of these rocky hills as blocks.We will deploy our forces in each block, and work together with the forces in other blocks to fend off the enemy until reinforcements arrive— everything clear so far?」

Ikuta looked to his subordinates to confirm. No one raise any questions, so the youth returned his gaze back to the map.

「The blocks are numbered to make it easier to reference, and also to represent their priority. Let me explain the reason for ranking them this way.

First off— this place here is the first block, the center of the blocks cluster. This is the deepest area, and surrounded by steep cliffs. And this is where the command headquarters is. We will lose if this place falls.

On the right is block two. It will shield the headquarters against attacks from the east. If it falls, it will just be a matter of time before we lose the entire thing.」

The officers gulped. After glancing at their tense faces, the youth continued:

「Beneath the first and second block, is block three. It is the smallest block, but is as important as the second block in shielding the headquarters and supporting the two blocks to the south. And of course, we can't let the enemy capture it.」

After emphasizing the importance of the first three blocks, he moved on to the outer blocks.

「Block four to eight don't have any priority over each other, and their importance would depend on how the enemy moves. block eight is the lowest because it is the furthest from the center block, and is the most difficult to support when attacked from the west. It is very likely that the enemy will target it, and make a foothold.

The sixth and seventh block face the same issue. In other words, if we can hold on to these blocks, the enemy won't be able to infiltrate in.」

Ikuta drew a line to link the five outer blocks, then slapped the map with his palm.


岩石地帯　戦場図
5
ブロック
7
ブロック
8
ブロック
バリケード
1
ブロック
2
ブロック
3
ブロック
バリケード
バリケード
洞窟＝司令部
4
ブロック
6
ブロック
N
S

「The fourth to eighth blocks are to maintain the defence line as long as possible, and keep the enemy away from the first to third blocks. Keep up your fighting capabilities and hold on until reinforcements arrives in four days— that's our winning condition.

The Igsem search team number around 5,000, while we have 2,400, so they outnumber us two to one— Since we are defending in a stronghold, it is very possible for us to complete this defence mission. With the rocky terrain around here, we don't have to worry about the enemy cavalry.」

The youth promised with a firm tone, then looked to his men again.

「The conclusion of the coup will be decided by this battle, so hear me out here.

Listen up, we aren't fighting because we have been pushed to the brink, but because victory here will open our path to the future. The divided Imperial Army will be reunited, and the nation on the verge of collapse will be righted— We will be fighting this last battle to make all this come true. Defend safely until the end, and end the chaos.」

His eyes were filled with determination as Ikuta said in a strong tone. He raised their morale by pointing out the reason they were fighting— aside from doing his due diligence as the commander-in-chief, the youth also spurred his subordinates with his pep talk.

「That's the plan and objective. If there are no further questions, I will now assign the commanders for each block.

The First block— will be commanded by me, since I have to consider the situation and issue orders for the whole unit. The Princess and other important political figures will stay in the headquarters.」

Ikuta paused here, then looked at the pudgey youth beside him.

「The second block— Matthew, I will leave it to you.」

「M-Me? … Wouldn't Torway be better?」

「It has to be you. I want Torway and his sniper team to move freely between the blocks. Coordinating with the neighbouring sixth and seventh block, and command the melee battle against the enemy— with all that in mind, you are the only one capable of adapting to the situation and taking command of the eastern defences.」

After listening to Ikuta explain the reason he was chosen, Matthew nodded firmly after a slight hesitation:

「… Leave it to me. I will defend the block to the bitter end, so don't worry.」

Matthew made a show of looking confident to express his determination. Ikuta looked at his display of dignity gratefully, and turned his gaze back to the front:

「Next will be the Third Block— less troops will be deployed here, so the commander has to deploy them swiftly and accurately. I will leave this to the seasoned veteran Captain Sezoi.」

「By your command!」

The appointee was an old officer who used to serve in the Rising Sun Regiment. The commanders have been supportive of Ikuta. The commanders for the 4th to 6th block were also selected with this criteria.

「And the seventh block— it will depend on how the battle goes, and its importance will rise as the battle drags on, and the burden of the troops will increase with that. With that in mind—」

He paused for a moment, then looked at the woman standing meekly at the far end of the officers and selected her.

「Sergeant Major Suya Mittokarifu, you will be in command. Your rank isn't high enough, so you are hereby promoted to brevet First Lieutenant.」

She was confused for a moment, and stood there with a dumb face. Until this moment, she didn't know the reason why she was summoned here.

「… H-Huh? P-Please wait! I'm just a Non Commissioned Officer? 」

「Not waiting. Each block has 300 men on average, and you are usually commanding my unit in my stead, so don't tell me you can't do it. If you want to enrol into the Military Academy for further studies, I will arrange it for you after all this is over.」

Suya wanted to say that's not the problem, but Ikuta's drowned her out with his strong words.

「I want to correct something. You are not just an NCO, but my deputy— and disciple.」

He stopped her refute with that. The youth continued with a serious face:

「My personal judgement is that you are capable of taking on this task. Any complaints?」

「…… No Sir.」

Suya lowered her head a little after a few seconds of silence, and answered. Ikuta smiled:

「Great, I will leave that to you— Continuing with the assignments, the last eighth block is—」

The War Council got back on track. With that last assignment, the deployment was all done.

「— That's the commander for each block. Aside from that, Captain Torway's sniper team and Captain Haroma's medic team will move between each blocks depending on the situation. From now until the defensive battle ends, there won't be any idle time to rest. 」

「… Yes!」 「Yes!」

Torway and Haro nodded at the same time. After that, Ikuta turned his gaze to the woman in light armour.

「Warrant Officer Lucanti's team will continue to guard the Princess and headquarters. You are the last line of defence, so don't act hastily. No matter what happens, act with the Princess' safety as your priority.」

「Yes Sir!」

She answered energetically. With that as the conclusion, the dark haired youth raised his voice.

「We will start the plan now— everyone, get to work!」

The soldiers rushed off, making the headquarters less crowded, Princess Chamille approached the dark haired youth with hesitation, as he watched his men go with a thoughtful face.

「Solork… Can I have a moment?」

「Hmm? What is it, Your Highness? The toilet is that way.」

「No! No… There's something I have to tell you now.」

The Princess said seriously, and lowered her head while biting her lips.

「… Sorry. It's all my fault that you are forced into this position…」

「It's not your fault at all. From the very beginning, it was that fox who had been acting from behind the scene and played us like a damn fiddle.」

The youth shrugged, dismissing her words, but the blonde girl shook her head.

「That's exactly why… I should have prioritized getting rid of him… and eliminated Trisnai. No matter what unsculptous means I had to do, I should have eliminated him.」

The Princess continued saying to the frowning Ikuta:

「Up until today, I should have plenty of opportunities to do so. I can do it with my position. I just need to approach him nonchalantly with a knife behind my back, and stab it into his chest— that would solve everything. The citizens and Sprites wouldn't be held hostage, and his schemes would be destroyed. Even if I have to die within, things won't have turned out this way— and you won't be forced to fight Yatori—」

The girl lamented her mistake. Ikuta laughed off her worries.

「I was wondering what you want to say, so you want to apologizing for not doing something that risky? I should compliment you instead— you did great to survive, Princess. Your cautiousness and wits— all that has become our hope.」

The youth patted the Princess' head as he said that firmly. The girl's shoulder trembled a little.

「Why are you treating me so kindly…? In the first place, I'm the one who made you a soldier against your own will! My family ravaged your home and took away your family! You should hate me so much that you will want to punch me! If not— if not…!」

As the Princess pressed in close with tears in her eyes, Ikuta suddenly showed a serious face:

「… That's true. About that, I have something to tell you too. Thank you, Princess. Thank you for giving me a push back then.」

He didn't respond with accusation or admonishment. It was the opposite instead. The Princess looked up at him with a gasp.

「What…」

「When I was taking the Officer Cadet exams— I was stuck. I stayed in the Empire for the sake of taking Yatori away with me, but as I struggled in doing so, I realized my methods were fundamentally wrong… and got into a dead end.

I wanted to save her, but I don't know how. Not just cutting Yatorishino off from the Igsem and taking her with me. But it is pointless if I don't save her from her fate of destruction— Faced with this contradiction, I was completely lost.」

Thinking back on his past struggles, Ikuta looked at the blonde girl.

「And then, you showed up. You ram through thick walls blocking the dead end, and dragged me into the path of a career soldier by force— I was angry at the start. Not joining the military was one of the promises I made with my mother before she died. So I hated you for making me break that promise.」

The youth heaved a long sigh, then looked up into the sky with a chirpy expression.

「But— that's fine. The more I think, the more I realized that there was no other way. To save Yatori, I can only change the country itself by joining the army. It was just a matter of time before I realized that, so this was just executing the plan before making this decision.

However… if the Princess didn't push me, I would have wasted several years. This blank period would have a fatal effect on the present times. When I think about that possibility— I feel nothing but gratitude towards you.」

Ikuta knelt down on the rocky terrain to match her height, and said:

「I can say this as many times as you like. Thank you for giving me that push, Princess. Thanks to you— I am in a position to save her.」

These words made the girl stood still. She didn't know what kind of face she was making.

「… Before the battle ends, please hide inside the headquarters. We have a base, but this is a real battlefield, and there's no telling when a stray bullet might come flying.

Oh, and one more thing— no matter what, don't go near that end of the headquarters. As you know, there are people more terrible than stray bullets.」

Ikuta warned as he pointed to the northern corner of the cave, where the Emperor and fox was quarantined. He then slapped his knee and said:

「I need to concentrate and think. I'm not thinking hard enough for an all out battle against her.」

Torway left the headquarters after the war council was over, and climbed up to the top of the First Block.

「Hmm… This is rather high.」

After surveying the surroundings, the youth stated his thoughts. However, the First Block was about as tall as the other blocks. It was shorter than the second, fourth and seventh block, and around the same height of the eighth block. He didn't have a clear view of the surroundings— which was natural, as there were blind spots because of the other blocks. Communications were crucial to grasping the overall flow of battle.

As the sky grew dim at 4pm in the afternoon, the troops had been deployed to the five outer blocks, with the final adjustments made as per the war council. Soldiers were bustling around the three blocks in the center too, as they transported ammunition and other supplies.

「What about Yatori-san…?」

The youth looked to the right with his telescope, observing the enemy camp that had twice their numbers. The Igsem search team deployed to the west northwest, east northeast, and the south remained unchanged since a few hours ago, and showed no signs of changing.

If the enemy weighed the risk and given up on the fight— the youth hoped, and another telescop came from the side.

「Unfortunately, they will definitely attack. Probably after dusk, so brace yourself.」

Ikuta said, as if he had seen through Torway's mind. Torway curled the corners of his lips and put down the telescope.

「… We can't avoid this battle?」

「That's right. If the enemy's intent is to reach a compromise through negotiations, they would have stated so already. Since there had not been any communications, we can only acknowledge their resolve.」

「They might still be deliberating on it, or maybe they are waiting for instructions from the top.」

「Given the distance from the Hunger Castle and the timing of the Jewel Voice Broadcast, they should have received their instructions. Since all the elements are in place, I don't think she will waste more time. Hence, she must be waiting for a good chance to attack.」

The youth stated calmly. Torway tried his best to listen to the prickling words, and cleared the naive thoughts out of his mind.

「… That's right. Your prediction about a night raid make sense. Since they know our main forces are windgunners, they would take measures against our sniping.」

「I will send the Luminous troops to work with them, and ensure a clear field of vision for night battles. However, we can't light up the entire place. If a small mobile unit infiltrates under the cover of darkness, it will be terrible. Wreaking havoc on the battlefield with a small elite team— That's Yatori's forte.」

Ikuta kept his telescope, and turned to the youth beside him.

「Before the fight breaks out, I'm telling this only to you— Given the situation, it will be easy to hold out if the enemy commander is mediocre. They have twice our number, but with our makeshift defences, we can hold on for four days easily.」

「… Yes, I think so too. If their commander isn't Yatori-san.」

Torway said stiffly. The dark haired youth nodded heavily.

「That's how it is… I have to put my all into this battle. And don't even hope we can best her tactically. I have never beaten her in terms of talent as a soldier. In all senses, I have never won against her before.」

After looking at the Igsem units deployed in the three directions, Ikuta continued with a stoic face.

「Not just you, Matthew, Haro, and maybe even the Princess is mistaken. Listen carefully— I can only act as the leader of the 『Knight Corp』 not because my tactical insight and planning abilities are better than Yatori. It's the opposite, I'm only second rate as a frontline commander, while Yatori is top class, so she is best suited to be the frontline commander.」

The jade eyed youth was surprised by that and shook his head.

「… I don't think so. Be it the northern territories or on the sea, we only overcome those obstacles because of your leadership. No— we only survived thanks to your strategic insights and Yatori's tactical abilities. That's the war chronicles of the 『Knight Corp』.」

「I'm happy to hear that, and I'm fairly confident of my past results— But I still have to say this. Just like how I can overcome difficulties with my methods, Yatori has her own way too. She gave me overall command in the past— but she is as capable in that aspect too.」

The youth stated his conclusion again, and stared at Torway.

「So it will be dangerous for me to go all out alone. If you don't show your hands too, we won't be able to make it.

… Listen, Torway, we have to win. Be the flag bearer that pioneers the next era of the battlefield, and crush Yatorishino Igsem. With

your cutting edge shooting technique, change the way war is fought, and replace the Igsem.

Only this result── can liberate her from her crimson fate and grant her freedom.」

Phew～ a gust of wind blew dust and sand between the two of them. As the youth stared at him, Ikuta lowered his gaze in self mockery.

「That is my only wish… now that I think about it, that's really awful of me. It's the bet of a lifetime, with the lives of my subordinates and companions on the line too.

So you can look down on me or curse me, I have been exploiting you all this while. I'm coercing you to shoulder the role of vanguard in the next generation of warfare── For the sake of my own goal, I'm forcing Torway Remeon to stay on the battlefield. The you who is so kind that you can't even bear to kill an animal in front of you.」

On the eve of the battle with her, the youth couldn't help sharing his true feelings. Torway could empathize with him and showed an unwavering smile.

「I chose to live this way by myself, Ik-kun. It's thanks to you that I can make this choice. I won't look down on you or curse you. Because── we are all standing here for the same reason. For the sake of getting back the good times we spent together with Yatori-san.」

After stating his unwavering resolve, the youth put his hand onto his chest. Seeing that Torway had no complaints at all, Ikuta raised the corners of his lips awkwardly.

「… I have been relying on your kindness since the first time we met.」

His sincere words spilled out from the gaps. Torway answered with a smile:

「You are only strict, cold and harsh to me— I always like that Ik-kun.」

His every move had a sincerity that Ikuta could never imitate… This youth had faced his weakness, and walked a perilous path all this way. Respecting his way of life, the dark haired youth raised his right arm.

「Let's win this one, partner.」

「— Yes!」

They bump their arms together. The cross formed by the two of them remained sturdily in place.

After 6pm in the evening, as the dark haired youth suspected, the Igsem troops started moving when the dark red sunlight faded from the west.

「All units, forward.」

The girl said quietly in the dark. The first to move was the units to the west northwest of the rocky terrain. The terrain was hard to traverse, but they still moved in orderly formation, closing in on the eighth block.

The strange thing about them was obvious at a glance. All of them covered one eye with an eyepatch, reducing the most important 「vision」 on the battlefield by half as they marched forth.

「Wind gunners, crossbowmen— squat. Front rank, get in cover.」

The unit stopped 150m away on command, and lowered their bodies as ordered. The front rank soldiers piled up rocks around them to set up a makeshift cover.

「Ready range weapons.」

The soldiers raised their weapons. The windguns and crossbow were spread orderly, as they aimed at the enemy formation.

Their enemy was aware of this, and search light shot out from the rocky zone before them. Afraid of revealing their positions, the soldiers all lowered their heads.

「Luminous troops, spread out. Platoons one to three— light them up.」

In contrast to everyone else, the commander was firm and steady. The Luminous troop behind the windgunners and fire troops shot out searchlight from the Luminous sprite on their crossbows as ordered. The entire place was brightly lit.

「Windgunners, crossbowmen— open fire.」

The troops squeezed their triggers on order— the battle on the first night started in the chilling silence.

「— The eighth block has engaged the enemy! It's a shootout with ranged attacks! Gauging by the number of searchlight and firepower, we estimate them to be about one battalion of 600 men!」

The messenger reported the situation after receiving the light signals. Ikuta received the report in the first block, and crossed his arms with a tense face.

「… It's good that they are attacking the eighth block as expected, but this is too weak of an attack for Yatori.」

「Yes, I feel the same way too.」

Torway beside him nodded, with a cautious gleam in his eyes.

「It might look like a force recon, but that's impossible. They already know our numbers, so there's no point in probing us now. But if they are serious about taking that block, they should send 2 or more battalions in one go.」

「That's true. This has to be a diversion.」

With that in mind, Ikuta said to the messenger:

「Tell the 4th and 5th block to stay alert. Even if their neighbouring block is being attacked, don't let the troops get too distracted. The

enemy might attack while their guard is down. Their first priority is to hold their assigned position.」

「Yes! Repeating your orders—」

After confirming the contents, the messenger relayed the youth's instruction. But before he could leave, another messenger came from the other direction and shouted:

「The 6th and 7th block has engaged the enemy! The sixth are under fire from the south, while the seventh is being shot at from the north! The blocks are retaliating independently! The enemy is about 2 companies, 400 men!」

As he processed the new information, Ikuta put his hand on his chin and fell into deep thoughts.

「They are coming from the east too… Their forces are very spread out. That's not her style.」

「Should we warn Ma-chan? Attacking the 6th and 7th block might be a diversion to assault the 2nd block between them…」

「No need, Matthew definitely noticed too. We have deployed more forces in those blocks, so it's unlikely for them to attack the second block. They would get picked off by the crossfire from the 6th and 7th blocks, and if need be, we can send reinforcements from the 1st block.」

He didn't worry unnecessary. Ikuta had already included his trust of the pudgey youth into his strategy.

「Yatori knows this too. Which means, the action over there is just a side event.」

With a vague sense of danger biting at him, Ikuta bit on his thumbnail.

「… Oh no. I can't tell what's her goal.」

With the enemy staying passive for unknown reasons, the soldiers in the 8th block kept up the fight steadily.

「Open fire! Dwindle their fire as much as possible!」

The frontline commander, a middle aged officer, Captain Maniga Shei projected his voice around him. It had been 20 odd minutes since the battle started, and casualties were still minimal. Since they had the high ground and had the cover of the boulders, it was easy to protect themselves from the shots from below.

「Okay, start firing from here too! Don't just depend on the guys up top!」

The soldiers fighting down below in the rocky terrain had the advantage too. They didn't have the high ground, but the support fire from above gave them the edge. They hid behind cover as they fought, and the enemy would pull back after a probing attack. They worked together with their allies above to pelt the enemy with projectiles.

This was the ideal situation. If they carried on like this, the losses would be minimal, while the enemy would get exhausted.

「… But the enemy won't let this situation stall out here.」

Captain Shei cautioned himself quietly. He didn't think the enemy would follow through with this foolish plan and head into their own demise. They were imperial soldiers too, so they also knew what he had learned before. With that in mind, the Captain didn't see any reason to expect the situation to stay the same.

「It won't matter, if the enemy charges… Then it is time to show our grit.」

Aren't I right, Lieutenant General Rikan— The Captain muttered to himself as he gripped the crossbow in his hands. In the past, he served under Bada Sankrei in the Rising Sun Regiment, and worked under Haakan Rikan in the former eastern territories. This situation was enough reason for him to fight. Because his morale was high, the commander Ikuta placed him in charge of the block that was relatively more dangerous.

「Please watch, General Sankrei… I will protect your will and your son.」

In the Captain's mind, the face of the General he deeply respected appeared. He glared towards the enemy with renewed vigor— and the scene before him made him frown.

「… Huh? Something… is off. Compared to earlier, something…」

Before him was the scene of his men targeting the enemy with searchlights. Something seemed off, but he couldn't really tell.

The Captain looked carefully, and found the reason. Two, three… the number of lights from the enemy started to increase.

「The number of lights is slowly increasing…?」

That was the reason behind his sense of dissonance. However, he didn't know the reason behind this. As the Captain tried to fathom the scene before him, the number of enemy searchlights kept increasing.

「… Something is wrong. Messenger, report the increase in searchlights to headquarters.」

「Yes Sir!」

「This might be a sign of an impending charge. We might need the commander's judgement— Ugh…」

When he decided that this might be a problem, the lights increased to a dazzling intensity. The soldiers around him all frowned, and would want to cover their faces, if not for the enemy before them.

「This… Are they trying to blind us? No matter, at this distance—」

When the captain was about to speak— it suddenly turned dark.

「– Huh?」

The countless lights before him all disappeared at the same time.

「Report from the Eighth block! The searchlight from the enemy is gradually increasing!」

The moment they received that report, Ikuta and Torway tilted their head puzzledly.

「… Are they trying to improve the effectiveness of their shots by made it brighter…?」

「Doing that would just make it easier for our windgunners to pick them off. Even if the lights dazzle their eyes, it's meaningless if not done from up close—」

The youth realized something mid sentence, and shouted as he stood up.

「— Tell the Eighth block to not look at those lights!」

「You can take off your eyepatch. All units, fix bayonets.」

The troops took off their eyepatch as ordered, and fixed bayonets and short spears onto their weapons.

「The flanks will move out first. Walk briskly until the foot of the hill, then start to jog. Follow this order strictly.」

The commander issued the order with the rocky terrain in mind. With an intense battle looming before them, everyone gulped.

「Begin the charge.」

In contrast to her tense subordinates, their commander showed no hesitation in issuing her orders. The soldiers started walking over the rocks, with the one eye they hid behind an eyepatch just now staring into the dark enemy formation.

「All unit on high alert! The enemy is going to attack by cover of night!」

Captain Shei shouted with foam in his mouth. He judged the searchlight disappearing is a sign of an impending charge.

「All platoons, report enemy status! What are they doing? How many of them are approaching the block from which angle!」

In the tense atmosphere, the soldiers squint their eyes and tried to see the enemy's movement. In order to keep up their field of vision, the Luminous troops desperately shone their searchlight. Numerous white light flashed across the darkness— but tens of seconds later, the soldiers didn't make any report.

「C-Captain…」

「What is it, report now! Stop wasting time!」

「B-But… We can't…」

They squeezed out a weak voice. As time passed by, there was a hint of fear in their voices:

「— Captain, we can't see anything…!」

The report sounded like a tragic scream, and Captain Shei rushed over immediately— and look at the scene below with his own eyes:

「……!」

Before him was 90% darkness and the 10% light shone by the Luminous troops. He couldn't see anything else. With how extreme the light and darkness was, he couldn't see the silhouette of the things in between. His men was right, he couldn't see the things he could just moments ago— Faced with this reality, Captain Shei pressed against his eye lid with his right hand:

「Our eyes… had adjusted to the bright lights…?」

At this moment, he finally understood the intention of the enemy— They gradually increased the lights during the shootout, and the defenders continued to stare at the lights. After an extended amount of time, the defender's pupils turned dilated. If the lights were put out at this time, the eyes that had gotten used to the darkness won't be able to see in the dark.

「Oh no, this trick is—」

The drawer in the Captain's mind started to rattle. But before he could open it, his troops reported with a scream.

「T-They are here! They are right before us—!」

The searchlights unveiled shadows everywhere, and they were so close that Captain Shei was dumbfounded. He yelled on reflex:

「Woooahhh! Open fire, open fire～～!」

The sound of compressed air exploding formed a chorus, and a hail of bullets rained down on the enemy charging the slope. Many fell in the darkness, however— the enemy returned fire and even more of them sprint up the slope.

「「「「Woooahhh!」」」」

The enemy that made it through the hail of bullets invaded the invader's territory, and fought in close melee combat where range was meaningless. The soldiers on the outside fixed their bayonets too slowly and got cut down haplessly, and the invaders penetrated even deeper.

「Don't falter, beat them off! Regroup!」

Captain Shei shouted because of the anxiety. The enemy had broken through the defence line, and he was sure that the battle would be lost if this went on. He tried to grasp the situation calmly.

「The enemy forces are concentrated on the northwest and southwest slopes! All units, engage the enemy from these two directions! Commit all our reserves, quickly!」

The Captain ordered his men whose eyesight was still affected. Gathering your forces to repel the enemy was the right move— however, the obvious answer was also predictable.

The soldiers re-deployed according to their commander's orders, but some of them noticed an abnormality from the other direction stated by their leader— someone was scaling the rocks with inhuman speed and approaching the peak in leaps and bounds.

「…? Hey, over there! Luminous trooper, shine a light— Uwah!」

Blood gushed from the throat of the soldier who leaned forth to check. A red figure leapt over him as he fell back, and the harbinger of doom landed. The vermillion hair fluttered in the darkness, with a blood stained saber in her right, and a short sword in her left.

「Hieee—」 「Uwahhh…」 「Hyaaaa!」

The screams of the soldiers overlapped with each other. All the imperial soldiers understood what this scene meant. The red swordsman stood before the panicking crowd, and took action before her companions caught up behind her.

「Tch—」

The sharp blades slashed out like the wind. The panicked bayonet thrust from the soldiers missed, and the merciless counter strikes took their life. The sword demon covered in blood charged into the middle of the enemy formation, and her subordinates following behind widen the gaps opened up by her. The assault was as furious as the tide, and similar to the battles in the past, no one could halt this attack.

「It's Yatorishino-san! Climb up the platform, we will stop her with the snipers!」

However, some people were taking action to face the problem. Torway's sniper team. The three of them scaled one of the many platforms erected on the block, and took aim.

「Phew…!」

They waited for the right moment to shoot the enemy on the chaotic battlefield. Following the dark haired youth's strict orders, they targeted below the thigh. Even an Igsem would slow down when shot, and that would be a chance to subdue her. It was the biggest chance of this crisis. If they capture her, it might even end this war.

After aiming the windgun without blinking for tens of seconds— the chance arises. The vermillion haired girl had reached the mid section of the block, and the troops were backing away in fear. Ironically, this cleared a path for his bullet. There was an opening lasting a fraction of a second between her cutting a soldier down and moving forward.

Taking this chance, the snipers squeezed their triggers. The bullets fired out with an explosion of compressed air, and no matter how skilled one might be, there was no way they could evade three bullets fired from three different directions—

「—Tch.」

— In that instant, the girl twisted her body and made all that effort futile. The three bullets missed her skin by centimetres. The snipers who hoped that at least one of the shots would land felt despair— they didn't miss, she just dodged all of them. In the chaos of the fight, she was still aware of the windgunners aiming at her.

After the snipers' attempt failed, no one could stop that girl's rampage. The soldiers in the Eighth Block were overwhelmed by the enemy swarming them, and couldn't regroup. The commander Captain Shei continued to resist, but his fight ended moments later.

「Don't give up, push them back! This is still the first day, we can't falter here—!」

The soldiers at the last line of defence continued their determined resistance. When a gap appeared somewhere along the defence line, a gust of wind slipped in through the opening.

「— Ugh?」

When the Captain realized it, the short sword was already on his neck. The girl who had went around to his back said coldly to the commander who had turned stiff.

「You have five seconds. Surrender or die?」

「……!」

The Captain felt the most intense chill in his life down his spine. This was his natural instinct giving him the biggest warning. Her voice was compelling enough to make any officer to put aside their pride and guts.

He didn't need five seconds. Before he even made his decision, his hands were raised involuntarily.

「Torway, don't go!」

Ikuta was firm in stopping the youth who wanted to lead his men to support the Eighth Block. With his eye still on the telescope, Ikuta said coldly.

「It's too late… The Eighth Block had fallen.」

Less than an hour after the battle started, the enemy took down one block. Torway stood in place silently, and the dark haired youth kept issuing commands to the messenger around him.

「Inform the 4th and 5th block to cover the retreat of our troops. Stop supportive actions of the Eighth Block, it has already fallen. I report— that block had fallen.」

The bad news from the commander resounded heavily. After settling this matter, Ikuta sat down in his chair, and put his palm on his forehead with a sigh.

「… We were had by the 『reverse』 of a light attack.」

「Huh…?」

「It's the opposite of a normal luminous assault that blind you with light, this method rob you of your vision with darkness. By exposing the enemy to searchlight by a long period of time, making them adjust to the brightness, and then putting out all the lights. Until their dilated pupils contract again, the enemy's vision would be severely impaired. If you charge during this opening, they wouldn't be able to put up any resistance.」

The youth also knew about this method, but he seldom used it as this was a sort of sneak attack. Normal luminous attack was easier to pull off, and produce good enough results. The effectiveness would drop significantly if it was seen through, which was another reason why this trick was difficult to execute.

But this was the right choice this time. Because the main bulk of Ikuta's defence were windgunners, so the range and accuracy would fall drastically because of this.

「If I took command of the Eighth Block personally, I would have discovered her intent in time… However, the frontline commander wasn't me, so Yatori used this method. I'm taking overall command of the blocks from the middle, where the west side of the Eighth Block was a blind spot— and she formulate her plan by taking these two factors into consideration. The troops she sent to the east was less of a diversion, and more of a trick to divide my attention.」

With Ikuta's plain explanation, Torway caught a glimpse of how intense their battle under the surface was. The youth gulped— if the frontline commander's report came a few minutes earlier, the results might be completely different. When he received news of the lights increasing, Ikuta saw through the trick in ten seconds, and send the appropriate instructions to the Eighth Block. If his instructions were carried out, Captain Shei might be able to hold out even longer. He just needed to switch his men who had gotten used to the bright light with the personnel on the other side of the block.

Just a difference of a few minutes, a few seconds, decided the battle. Torway realized that the youth and girl he held in high regard were engaged in an intense fight.

「Control of the light is my forte, but she took it over right away— That's Yatori for you. She can do most of the things I can do. I have learned this once again in this first exchange.」

A bitter smile appeared on his lips as he said that. After closing his eyes to organize his thoughts for a few seconds, Ikuta ordered:

「Torway, send one sniper platoon to the 4th and 5th blocks, to pressurize the 8th block occupied by the enemy. Don't give them any chance to cool down.」

After dealing with the situation at hand, the youth looked towards the 8th block that was lost, and muttered:

「Since we lost it, we have to take it back. It's my turn now, Yatori.」

Ikuta described the 8th block as 「the place where the enemy will nail in a piton」. And the vermillion haired girl immediately hammered in the piton after taking the block.

The next target was the 5th block to the northwest. The 8th block looms over that block, so they could fire at that stronghold directly with windguns. However, the 4th block to the southwest overlooks the 8th block, so Ikuta's forces wouldn't get attacked one sidedly. The projectiles went in the order of 4th → 8th → 5th blocks, resulting in a shootout between the blocks.

At the same time, the 2nd, 6th and 7th blocks to the east continued their engagement battle. The Igsem faction attacked mainly with ranged shots and disrupting lights, and was obviously trying to sap the energy of the Rising Sun Regiment. Instead of risking a charge, they want to tire Ikuta's forces and make them waste ammunition.

「Conserve your shots, and don't fire before the enemy draws close! Make sure we have enough to use when the enemy charges!」

Matthew who was commanding the defence of the Second Block also knew the objective of the enemy, but couldn't relax in this mental battle. Was the enemy harassing them to drain their will? Or

a precursory attack before a real charge? Or maybe a diversion to assault another block? He couldn't be certain which was it.

「If we show any opening, we will end up like the 8th block…!」

The youth warned himself. The fact that one block had fallen was enough to rob him of any optimism. Keeping the news of the counter light attack in heart, Matthew focused on the enemy in the dark.



「Very well, Yatori— come at me! Don’t think you can take out my defences so easily!」

After fighting for the entire night, the Igsem faction didn’t send any massed attack after the 8th block fell. But they kept up a facade of being ready to charge at a moment’s notice, which tormented the Rising Sun Regiment the entire time.

Getting a good night's sleep in the quarantined village was the right choice. Under the gradually brightening sky, Ikuta thought as he chewed on coca leaves. He missed the times when he could sleep in a hammock whenever there was time.

「Let’s take back the Eighth Block, Commandant! The enemy didn’t garrison many of their forces there, so we can win with the support of the 4th Block!」

On the second day of the battle, after the group ushered in the dawn without catching a wink, several officers proposed to Ikuta. But the youth shook his head without any hesitation:

「— No. Even if we seize it back, we don’t have the forces to deploy there. More than 50 died when the Block fell into their hands, and three times that number were captured. If we transfer men from the other blocks there, it would result in our overall defences failing instead.」

「But if we don’t, we will lose the 5th Block! If it goes badly, it will fall within the day…!」

「That’s why I sent the snipers over there. We can rest easy in the day. No matter what they throw at us, they will push them back.」

Ikuta said firmly to his subordinates who looked uneasy. And then— his words proved to be true as the sniper team performed splendidly.

「Ready, aim! …Fire!」

Torway took to the field personally in the 4th Block with his seasoned men, and shot the enemy around the 8th Block with precision.

Both sides were windgunners, but the accuracy of their shots were worlds apart. Compared to Torway who was familiar in fighting with the new Air Rifles, the Igsem faction was still forming ranks to fire uniform shots.

「Shyaaa! —D-Damn it, my leg got hit!」

「Fall back if you are wounded! Hey~ medic, stretcher this guy out!」

The stretchers moved between the 8th Block and the Igsem base constantly, as the plan by Torway's team yielded great results. As instructed by the dark haired youth, the snipers aimed at the enemy's legs.

「Good, keep it up! Continue firing…!」

They weren't holding back, and were doing this for two reasons. First, by aiming at non lethal spots, it would reduce their resistance to fire upon their former colleagues. Next, compared to the dead, the injured would give more trouble to the enemy. Two soldiers would be needed to stretcher out one casualty, and personnel needed to be assigned to bandage the wound.To the jade eyed youth, this was the best plan he could ask for. Thanking the other youth for letting him fight in such a way, Torway shifted his eyes to the next target, and kept squeezing his trigger—

「The troops seem hesitant to move forward.」

Major Megu watched the situation from above and commented. It was directed at the young commander standing nearby.

「That can't be helped. After daybreak, their bullets are scarily accurate, and casualties are mounting in the western blocks we spent so much effort to capture. The possibility of getting shot will

naturally make them hesitant to go. Fortunately, most of them don't have life threatening injuries…」

When she heard this comment, the vermillion haired girl shook her head to refute the last part.

「The soldiers getting shot in the leg isn't a matter of luck, but the result of their strategy. By doing so, they are forcing us to divert our manpower to carry out the injured, and drain our fighting potential. In this uneven terrain, even a minor leg injury will render a soldier unfit for battle.」

Major Megu didn't expect such a layered reason and gasped.

「They pay so much attention to details… What should we do, stop our attack before dusk?」

「I already planned to do that, but we will continue a shootout on a smaller scale. If the sound of shooting stops, the enemy will get to rest. Especially the snipers, we have to force them to keep on fighting and wear them out. That will speed up the rate of their ammunition expenditure.」

The girl said without hesitation, and continued with a gaze on a soldier brought back on a stretcher:

「We are taking casualties because our windgunners are still not used to such long range shoot outs. Those who can keep fighting possess the acumen for such battles. When their numbers increase to a certain point, the situation with mass casualties will stop.」

Major Megu's face turned gloomy. There were too many unfamiliar elements in this battle.

「A trial by fire… I understand the logic, but isn't that too brutal?」

In response to the critical rebuttal, her crimson eyes turned icy.

「Our forces are 5,000 strong, the acceptable loss through killed in action and heavy injuries is 1,500. With that limit in mind, this is a

necessary sacrifice. Do you have any objections with regard to this plan?」

She asked after stating the proper military doctrine with a steely voice. There could be no other answer, and Major Megu said with gaze lowered:

「… No objections. You are right. Too perfectly right, Lieutenant Colonel Igsem.」

「Good. Do address me as such in the future too, Major Nudakka Megu.」

The girl's tone changed into that of an order. Major Megu saluted in response and realized— she no longer need the opinion of an adjutant.

The day was filled with minor skirmishes, and the second night fell. Late at night, after 11pm, the Igsem faction sent out a force to fight a decisive battle.

「The enemy is approaching from the north of the Fifth Block! A force larger than two battalion!」

「Yes, we can see them from here too.」

Ikuta answered with his eyes to the north. The Fifth Block had the lowest altitude of all the blocks, so the youth could see over it from the First Block, and observe the enemy.

「Order the Seventh Block to provide support fire. The Fourth Block will continue suppressing fire on the enemy in the Eighth Block.」

「Ik-kun, should we go to the Fifth or the Seventh?」

「Send two platoons to the Seventh Block. You stay here on standby. We need to provide support from this block too.」

The youth said as he pointed to a corner of the block before him:

「The weak point of the Fifth Block is the southwest slope. It is less steep than the other places, and offers less defences against a

charge. With the Eighth Block covering this flaw gone, Yatori will definitely attack this opening.」

「I understand, then I will shoot at the enemy within range of the platform here.」

「Be careful of your safety when you shoot. The Eighth Block will definitely retaliate.」

Nodding to express his understanding, the youth gathered his men in the west of the First Block, and executed his plan. For snipers, providing support fire against the enemy from relative safety was a key feature.

「Report from the Fifth Block! Another two battalion has appeared behind them, and is flanking to the west!」

The report he expected came shortly afterwards. Ikuta nodded in response.

「They are already here. Contact the unit from the First to Fifth Blocks, spread out and engage the enemy.」

「Yes Sir!」

The Luminous sprite flickered to relay the message to the other blocks. After issuing the opening command, the youth started thinking about the later development.

「Don't falter, press on! If we lose our nerves, we won't be able to take them!」

Gun shots mixed with cries came from all over the place. The Igsem unit under the command of Captain Yuhado flanked to the southwest of the Fifth Block, and attacked it.

「The block we are attacking will fight back, and the supporting fire from the central blocks are intense… Looks like there is no way we can avoid casualties.」

The Captain clicked his tongue bitterly as he muttered. The enemy in the block was putting up strong resistance, and a drawn out battle

would result in more casualties. He wanted to capture the enemy base as quickly as possible, but that was easier said than done for the frontline soldiers.

「Ah, I slipped…!」 「Damn it! They splashed oil here!」

As they put their lives on a charge, the soldiers climbing the slope fell one after another. In order to reinforce the weakness of the southwest slope being gentler than others, Ikuta instructed the defenders to splash oil there ahead of time. Most of their depleting stock of vegetable oil were spilled down here.

In the First Block, the unit under Torway's command rain down bullets at the soldiers moving slowly up the slope. The soldiers shot in the leg were immobilized halfway up the slope, and had to either wait for their comrades to rescue them, or to roll down the slope themselves.

「— All platoons, ladders to the front.」

As the unit that flanked to the southwest engaged in a hard battle, the forces commanded personally by the vermillion haired girl to the north took new actions. Columns of soldiers carrying brought long items to the front, and the searchlights revealed it shortly after.

It was a siege ladder that was over ten metres tall.

「Propped them up. Rear ranks spread out and cover them.」

The soldiers with the ladders ran to the slope together. Realizing their intention, the enemy focus their shots over there. But they refused to fall down easily in the hail of projectiles.

「Woooahhh!」 「Prop it up, prop it～～!」

When one man got hit and falls, another will take his place. If he gets hit too, then another steps up. They reached the foot of the rocky hill after repeating this several times, and their efforts resulted in more than a dozen ladders erected within a few minutes.

「— The path has been paved. Begin the charge.」

Seeing that the preparations were done, the girl issued the order— She didn't take the field this time. Because she knew that with Ikuta Sankrei and Torway Remeon, the enemy was definitely capable of repelling this attack. Even with the fame of being the strongest swordsman, the Igsem wouldn't make the foolish mistake of over confidence in their own abilities.

The soldiers launched their attack on the block, and the gun shots against them grew in intensity.

「Report from the Fifth Block! The enemy has erected a large number of ladders! The assault from the southwest is growing in intensity too, and we are being pushed back!」

「Sigh, of course that will happen.」

Ikuta received the reports of the expected development without missing a beat— Because of the rocky terrain, the enemy couldn't bring heavy siege weapons with them, but ladders could be carried by hand. From Yatori's perspective, there was no reason not to use them.

Furthermore, it was natural to use them for the attack on the Fifth Block. The reason was simple, this was the shortest Block, so the ladders could be counted on to yield great results.

「It's fine. The enemy's attack from the north will soon ground to a halt.」

The youth didn't give any specific instructions, and made a declaration. He looked into the distance with his telescope— not at the intense battle in the Fifth Block, but into the darkness further into the east.

As the soldiers waited for their turn to charge with bated breath, several of them suddenly collapsed with a cry.

「Shyyaaa…!」 「—? What happened!」

The soldiers gathered around their comrade who collapsed, and saw blood seeping out of his back. A female soldier turned back suddenly:

「Gun shots…! Coming from the rear!」

When they realized that, the vermillion haired girl in command saw it happening. She turned in the other direction of their attack, and stared into the darkness with her crimson eyes—

「They seem to have noticed. Fire at will!」

Two hundred odd windgunners were spread out several hundred metres away to the northeast of the Fifth Block, under the cover of the dark. One of the platoon commanders of forty men was Second Lieutenant Naqun Cook, from Torway's sniper team. They aimed at the back of the enemy before them, and concentrated on squeezing their triggers. This surprise attack was arranged by Ikuta. The Second Lieutenant's group evaded detection by the Igsem and moved out of their base, and attack the enemy that had massed in one location. A sudden surprise attack from a one-sided defensive battle. They hid in the darkness, and only the searchlight of the Luminous troops could detect them.

「Aim carefully! They are going to snap out of their confusion!」

A few seconds after the Second Lieutenant said that, one of his men looking to the northwest noticed an abnormality.

「Second Lieutenant, searchlight spotted at two o'clock! They must be searching for us!」

「Ughh…! Just like what the commandant said, they have set up an ambush too!」

The Second Lieutenant raised his guard, but didn't waver. The dark haired youth had already told him the strategy to deal with incidents like this.

「We will be splitting up! We and the Second Platoon will act as bait, and lead them on a wild chase!」

「Lieutenant Colonel Igsem, the attack on our rear aren't stopping! Aren't those lights the counterattack from our allies?」

Losing patience with the attack from behind, one young company grade officer asked his commander. The vermillion haired girl nodded and said:

「… I set up an ambush in case of an attack on our rear. And those lights are definitely our allies. Since the attack didn't stop, that means they couldn't track the enemy.」

「Why is that… No matter how dark it is, our allies are Luminous troops, and an enemy unit moving in a group should be very prominent.」

She calmly explained to the officer who was furrowing his brows from confusion.

「The enemy isn't moving as a group, and is probably moving independently in platoon or section levels. They probably have a team assigned to engage their pursuers and act as bait. In contrast, the two companies I sent out are afraid of getting crushed if they split up, and are moving as a group. The difference in their agility is completely different. In this terrain and darkness, they couldn't even find the enemy, lest engage them.

This is the unit dispersal tactics of the new era— I have some knowledge of this, but not in depth enough. In this situation where you can't even see your own comrades, they actually manage to execute such a flexible tactics by setting up the movement plan ahead of time.」

Igsem said stiffly with a tone of respect towards the Remeon. The officer was taken aback by her aura, but still said:

「H-How about sending them reinforcements? If we encircle them with more men, no matter how agile they are—」

The girl immediately refute the instinctive proposal he made:

「That would mean relaxing the offensive here. While we are chasing a small number of enemy, our allies in the southwest is getting crushed, and that will be walking right into the enemy's plan.」

「How about sending the units not involved in the attack here to reinforce them!」

「We don't have that many reserves left. If we send in another battalion of 600 men, we might let most of the enemy slip away anyway. And while we are chasing them, we won't be putting the other blocks in check. Then the enemy will commit more of their forces into this block.」

Her analysis was cold and on point, and she had already come to a conclusion:

「Then, we have only one option— disregard the attack from the rear and continue the charge.」

When he heard that, the company grade officer stood there dumbfoundedly— and finally recovered a few seconds later.

「What— e-even if you ask us to disregard it, our troops are still getting shot!」

「The enemy's numbers are limited, and the ones acting as bait can't shoot at us, so their rate of fire won't be too high. Instead of letting the enemy shoot at us, we will suffer more losses if we fail to take the Fifth Block.」

The metallic voice coldly demanded his acknowledgement. The young officer was dumbstruck.

「If you understand, then read back my order. What's our plan?」

She won't even allow him to keep quiet. The company grade officer said with a trembling voice:

「… C-Continue the charge, and ignore the attack on our rear…」

After listening to every word, the girl from house Igsem nodded seriously.

「Execute the plan.」

With the efforts of the soldiers defending the rock hills, the support from the other blocks and the windgunners that went around to the enemy's back, the defence of the Fifth Block remained solid. As he observed the situation from the First Block and analyzed the information from the other blocks, the dark haired youth formed an image of the battle in his mind.

「… Okay, we are almost at the limit.」

He said curtly as if he was trying to cut off his own obsession, and stated his decisions to the messengers around him.

「Order the unit in the Fifth Block to retreat. Tell them to retreat to the space between the First and Second Blocks.」

「Yes Sir— But is this fine? The Fifth Block's commander had not sent any reports of difficulties in their defences…」

「That's alright. Most of the time, Yatori will notice that the limit has been reached before the subject himself does.」

Ikuta concluded with a shrug. With a sideways glance on the messengers relaying the message, he sighed deeply.

「Even though they are getting shot from behind, your unit in the north didn't move at all… You are really making things difficult for me.」

The youth muttered with a wry smile, and cast his gaze to the other end of the rocky hill, where she probably was. The sight of the deadly battle over there was obvious from the numerous lights flickering over there.

「But even so, tonight’s battle is our win with a ratio of seven to three. We have to give up the Fifth Block, but we got enough compensation, and took out a lot of your troops.

— That’s right, we killed many good men. Every person we killed directly and indirectly will be accounted for in the end.」

The youth palmed his forehead, as if an invisible weight was resting on his back. He held this pose for five seconds, permitting himself to be distracted from something aside from the battle in his mind.

「… Okay.」

He lifts his head exactly five seconds later, and the weakness in his dark eyes were gone. He straightened his back, and he spoke as if he was shaking off the gloomy emotions on his mind.

「The tilted scale has been balanced to a certain extent. Tomorrow will be the third day— the halfway mark, Yatori.」

A dark shade of exhaustion hung over the faces of the soldiers, and the defensive battles moved on to the third morning. The drawn out battle continued in the Fifth Block, sapping their already depleted stamina.

「Please only send the heavily injured here! The lightly wounded should go over there!」

The field hospital was already filled with casualties, and Haro who had to patch them up worked throughout the night. Compared to the Eighth Block that fell in no time, there were many more casualties sent from the drawn out battle in the Fifth Block.

「Mmm～! Mmmm—! Mmm ugghhh—!」

「Don’t let him struggle! Tie him down tighter!」

Before him was a struggling soldier with a pained expression and a towel in his mouth. She was digging out the bullet in his body. There were many more soldiers with similar gun wounds, and she couldn’t spare the effort to lessen their pain. Pulling open the wound, sticking

the tweezers in, pushing open the muscles and pulling the bullet out. Haro had forgotten how many times she had repeated this procedure.

Cases where she could extract the bullets were still fine, but there were many shot in the belly and chest who were beyond saving. There wasn't time to grieve as the name of the injured was updated to the nominal roll of the dead, and the next injured was brought in with the bed that was now open. She continued treating them, and had to numb her emotions. In a sense, the medics faced death more frequently than those on the frontlines.

「That person is already dead! Carry him out!」

To conserve their limited space, they prioritize efficiency when dealing with the dead. In the corner of the block that was designated as the morgue, corpses started to pile up, and they couldn't even spare the effort to lay them all on the ground. The corpses were covered with black clothes that block out the sun, but the stink of rot was getting worse.

With two blocks lost, the intensity of shots fire increased in the day. As the vermillion haired girl predicted, the Igsem windgunners had slowly gotten used to using cover to engage in shootouts, and Torway's team couldn't shoot them like sitting ducks anymore. Their accuracy fell while their rate of fire increase, and they expended ammunition faster than usual.

The soldiers were getting anxious. It was normal for the defensive battle to get harsher as the fight drones on, but the pressure from the Igsem laying siege on them was more intense than usual. And there were some who couldn't take the heat. Four soldiers from the Sixth Block attempted to desert, and was 「dealt with」 by the commander there. Ikuta nodded silently when he received the reports, and issued his orders monotonously for some time.

With everyone on edge, time passed slowly. It was dusk before long, and the battle along the rocky hills entered the third night.

As the sunset, a large army started their assault on the Seventh Block.

── What am I doing?

Since the battle started, Suya Mittokarifu had asked herself that countless times.

「Move one platoon from the north to the east, and join in the firing! The west defences switch with the reserves!」

The female soldier's voice echoed in the rocky hill filled with people. After getting assigned to the Seventh Block First Lieutenant Suya had been fighting desperately. She led a group of officers who were older and and out ranked her not too long ago.

「The Luminous troops in the west, shift your lights forward! We can't see the foot of the hill!」

Despite the position she was in, she had lost her reservations. The environment Suya was in had always been volatile.

She was just a Sergeant Major in the Imperial Army, but after some twist of fate, she became a non commissioned officer of a rebel army, and was now an officer. Right now, she was in command of 300 odd men, and in a fierce battle with her former imperial army colleagues.

I have fallen to an incredible new low, Suya thought. It was so incredible that it felt refreshing.

But was there a reason for her to fall so low?

「Ladders approaching from the east! Snipers, try to take out the enemy before they put up the ladder!」

She dealt with the danger she spied from the corner of her eye swiftly. Pushed into this desperate situation, her observation of the enemy and processing of the situation had grown keener than ever. However, in a corner of her heart, she kept asking herself pointless questions.

For example— the re-establishment of the Rising Sun Regiment. That incident which resulted in many people, including Suya, seceding from the imperial army, was a surprise to Suya, but she didn't feel any intense emotions. She knew the exploits of this famous regiment, but she didn't pay it too much mind, or even know Bada Sankrei. Hence, she couldn't understand how these factors motivated the decision makers. She didn't understand what they meant by inheriting the will of the late famous general.

「The left side of the western wall is crumbling! Someone go fix it!」

The attentiveness of the troops were slipping, and the commander had to make up by issuing commands more frequently. Ignoring her sore throat, Suya raised her voice— the battle had reached its climax, but a corner of her mind was still adamant about talking nonsense.

By the way— she didn't know the chain of events that led to this development.

Suya didn't know politics. Recently, she would think about it a little, but politics still seemed distant, like something from another world. She could read, write, measure, assemble and disassemble crossbows and wind guns. The non commissioned officers were all taught these necessary skills, and didn't think they need to know more. There weren't any nosy people who taught these to the non commissioned officers either. Just a few years ago, there wasn't any problem at all.

Then— was having a nosy commander the beginning of her downfall?

「Ammunition supply has fallen to one third! Rush headquarters for resupply!」

Suya shouted to the messenger, and in a corner of her stubborn heart, she admitted unhappily— it was true. Before she knew it, she had been pulled down this path.

Be it the mock battle, the northern territories or the sea, she had been learning from him and fighting at the same time. If not, she would have been killed in action, or stopped following him. There was no end to the things she learned from the young officer, and it hastened her urge to learn more.

Learning his strategy, his personality, and way of life.

When Suya realized it, she would search for his figure when he was around.

「Move the injured to the south of the block! Those on standby help those who can't walk!」

The more time she spent with him, the more her dissatisfaction with him accumulated.

Angry at him for slacking off whenever he had the chance.

Angry at him for wooing every older woman he saw.

Angry at him for keeping a distance from everyone aside from his Knight Corp companions.

Angry at him and Yatorishino Igsem knowing each other so well.

Angry at him for taking her, his adjutant, out to drink so infrequently.

And the most aggravating of all, that it bothered her so much.

「Gunners to the north, stop firing for now! The enemy is baiting us into wasting bullets!」

She hoped their relationship wasn't one sided. Because she had fought with her life on the line more than once. She answered his request, and was fighting desperately now too.

Even though she worked so hard, his attitude towards her was casual, and he paid less attention to her, compared to the vermillion

haired girl and the blonde Princess. She felt too disgusted to even make this comparison. She was an older woman, but he had never hit on her, and seldom chat with her outside of work. Even when she completed his task, he never patted her head.

Despite the grievances in her heart, just the word 'disciple' made her jump with glee.

How vexing. She was so frustrated at being toyed with.

「—! —nant!」

That was the reason, Suya suddenly realized.

There wasn't the obligation of the Igsem house, goal of the Remeon faction, or inherit the will of a certain person.

Right now, Suya Mittokarifu was standing here out of frustration.

「—First Lieutenant Mittokarifu!」

A familiar voice echoed in her ear drums, and she looked to the side in surprise. Her subordinate's voice that was drowned out by the noise of battle finally reached Suya.

「Report from headquarters! 『Supply of bolts and bullets will cease immediately. When the supply is low, abandon post and retreat immediately』!」

The female soldier who received the report relayed it in a volume on par with the noise of the battle. When she realized the content of the message, Suya bit her lip and looked around her— The ammunition crates behind the windgunners were two thirds empty. Their bolts supply was even worse.

The nonstop battles had slowly drained the ammunition stockpile of the unit as a while. That was the reason why the supplies were stopped. If this went on, their supplies would be used up in the defence of the Seventh Block— Ikuta made the call, and decided to abandon that Block.

This meant it was time for Suya's battle for the past few hours would finally end. That report also implied that they should withdraw. Normally, when she received this order, she had to start preparations to withdraw immediately.

「……!」

However— she ignored her subordinate who wanted to say something, and returned her gaze to the enemy.

「… All units, reduce the engagement range by ten meres! Only fire at enemy who crossed our defence line!」

「First Lieutenant? Instead of directing the attack, we should prioritize the preparations to retreat!」

「We can still hold out, it's not time to retreat yet! This is the last line of defence protecting the central blocks!」

「You are right, but we can't fight without bullets! The ammunition can only last for tens of minutes—」

「I'm saying we will retreat after that tens of minutes! Heed my command!」

Suya ordered loudly as if she was trying to deny this rebuttal, and continued to direct the defence. Her high morale was chaining her down instead, not allowing her to leave at the best opportunity.

「The enemy is massing to the north! There are signs of an impending charge…!」

And the enemy commander was not naive enough to miss such an opening.

「All units, fix bayonets.」

On that order, all the windgunners and crossbowmen fixed blades to their weapons.

Their defence lines kept falling back, which meant their ammunition was depleting. The vermillion haired girl realized the intent of the enemy to conserve munitions and fight on, which was

why she sent troops to the southeast slope that had not been attacked yet.

Before this, she had been applying pressure to the northern slope of this block. In terms of offence, surrounding it would be the most ideal, but her forces would be attacked by the two blocks in the center, so she had to choose an angle that wouldn't be hit by the other blocks.

But despite that fact, the girl broke this restriction on her own accord. By doing that, her forces attacking the southeast would be fighting on two fronts. However— the enemy's ammunition would be exhausted soon, so attacking from new angles was a basic tactic. The enemy would need to send their men to engage the new enemy, and further divide their dwindling ammunition.

「Begin the charge.」

By spreading the thick wall out, it had to sacrifice its depth. In order to pierce through the thinning defence, the girl from house Igsem sent out her forces at an impeccable timing.

In the face of the swarming enemy, their ammunition depleted at a terrifying pace. There was no way they could conserve their bullets. With destruction looming with every minute, Suya clenched her fist to quell her trembling.

「Ughh…!」

She had to admit, her estimation from before was too optimistic. The enemy increased the number of attack angles by assaulting the southeast, as if they could see Suya's depleting ammunition. Her previous estimate of ten minutes was cut in half.

「First Lieutenant, we are at our limits! Please order the retreat!」

「… No, we can hold out for five more minutes! We got so far, so we will do as much as we can!」

Rejecting her subordinate's opinion, Suya continued her stubborn defence. She was being wilful, but on the other hand, she had a basis

for saying five minutes She had an accurate grasp of their remaining ammo.

The three platoons to the north were using bullets very quickly, and they managed to get by because the other platoons share their ammunition with them. If they execute this perfectly, they could avoid any unit from failing to put up a defence despite having bullets to spare— she made this judgement and continued her command. However...

「S-Spare us some bullets! We are running out!」

「We are running out too! Try another platoon!」

Reality was different from what Suya predicted. The frontline soldiers refuse to share their depleting ammo, and those who ran out had to find another platoon, however…

「Hey, spare some bullets—」

「We don't have any to spare! Look, we will be out in a few minutes!」

The soldiers pointed to the depleting munition crates and yelled. Their sense of responsibility to their post and the fear of the enemy before them made each unit do the same thing.

This was completely Suya's mistake. Her judgement of the limit was not in sync with her subordinates. They were forced to the brink mentally, and couldn't share their munitions with the others.

Suya forgot a lesson he learned from the dark haired youth— fighting battles without leaving any buffer was a mistake in itself.

「Hey, bullets! I'm out, someone, give me some bullets—!」

The soldiers stopped firing and waited for resupply, and were literally screaming for bullets— and right after that, their defence line crumbled. The enemy charged up the northern slope and into the rocky hill, engaging the defenders in melee combat.

「—!」

They had gone past their limits. Suya realized that, and when she was about to issue the order to retreat, the subordinate beside her yelled loudly:

「Message from headquarters— all units in the Seventh Block are to retreat! The commander is to retreat with all her forces! I repeat, all units in the Seventh Block are to retreat!」

「…! Ahh—」

The woman opened her eyes wide in surprise. Headquarters had issued the orders she should have given.

「Did you hear that, First Lieutenant Mittokarifu!? We are really pulling out this time!」

Her subordinate's stern voice reached her. After fixing a short spear on her crossbow, that female soldier continued:

「Our platoon will be the rear guard! We will defend our comrades until the bitter end! You will be fine with that, right!?」

Encouraged by these words, Suya quickly scanned her surroundings. Although they were put on the back foot, the soldiers were still fending off the invaders from the north with everything they had.

「……!」

Slapping her face with her own hands, she perked herself up— now wasn't the time to daze off, she had to send more of her comrades back safely with time her soldiers had bought.

「… First and Second platoon, start retreating from the rear ranks! Go down the southern slope, and retreat to the space between Block One and Two! Move!」

Suya analyzed the situation and started covering their retreat. Since the enemy had infiltrated, they would get shot from the back if all of them turned and ran. On top of that, if a large group charged down the slope mindlessly, there was the danger of someone falling

and tripping many others. So she had to bear with the anxiety, and let the front ranks hold back the enemy first, and send only a few back at a time.

The soldiers on the outer edge of the block retreated slowly as the enemy advanced. As she steadily covered the retreat of her subordinates in batches, Suya and the rear guard platoon stayed in the Seventh Block. However— when 60% of her men had fled, there was a strange cry from the front ranks.

「Hieee—」

「Ahh…」

「Uwahh!」

Blood spluttered from a corner of the defence line, followed by death throes. When Suya looked over in shock, the screams got even closer.

Realizing the enemy was charging in with abnormal speed, she immediately told her comrades to be on their guard.

「— Tch.」

A soldier was cut down before her, and the vermillion haired figure wielding dual blades stood on the other side.

「—Ahh…」

I'm dead, Suya thought. The blood stained saber thrust towards her as she stood stiffly— the blade suddenly stop before it pierced her breast.

「We surrender.」

Because Suya's female subordinate standing beside her had raised a white flag.

「Issue the surrender order to your unit.」

The vermillion haired girl urged with the blade tip on Suya's breast. Her steely voice devoid of any humanity made Suya gasp— Suya realized a fact as she looked into that girl's eyes.

There was only Igsem there. The girl that made her envious, jealous and whom she admired was gone.

「Hurry, First Lieutenant…!」

Her subordinate who was gripping the white flag with trembling hands urged Suya to yield. The saber inched forward slightly, breaking the skin on her breast in lieu of an ultimatum.

Just kill me then, Suya wanted to yell if she could. But her responsibility as the commander didn't permit her to do so. She clenched her fist, and yelled:

「…… Cease your fighting! All units, lay down your arms and surrender!」

With this final order, the soldiers fighting in the Seventh Block that was on the verge of falling put down their weapons and raised their hands one by one. After seeing that, the vermillion haired girl finally retracted her saber.

「… Why…」

Suya asked in a deep voice. Her fight was over, but the person she couldn't forgive was right before her.

「… Why did things turn out like this…!」

Suya yelled with no regard for the consequences, and completely forgot that she was now a prisoner of war. After losing control, her emotions started going wild.

「Y-You are so sly! Even though he loves you so deeply! And think of you so much! From a long time ago, you have the very thing I can't obtain no matter how much I wish for it…!」

The vermillion haired girl didn't even raise a brow. Her subordinates tried to restrain Suya who was walking towards that girl, but Suya's legs still strode forth stubbornly.

「But why, why are you behaving like this!?」

Suya blinked away her tears, and poured her heart out. As if she was trying to break through the wall of blades to get through the girl on the other end of that wall.

「Say something! You are listening, right? Are you still there?」

The girl calmly shifted her gaze from the person screaming at her, and left silently. Suya squeezed her hoarse throat, and yelled with all her might at the figure who was walking away.

「Answer me, Yatorishino――!」

In the wee hours, 3.22 am, the Seventh Block fell. From that moment on, the core of the defences, the First and Second Blocks were finally exposed to direct attacks. The Igsem faction had captured the 8th→ 5th → 7th Blocks in that order, and garrison their forces there as the beachhead for their attack on their final goal.

「There's two hours until day break! We have to hold out until then!」

The Second Block under Matthew's command put up a strong resistance. Knowing that 「it's all over if that block falls」, Ikuta and Torway provided generous support, and the pudgey youth's garrison blocked the Igsem with a stubborn defensive wall.

The battle that lasted till dawn was intense. Casualties were heavy for the Igsem, and the Rising Sun Regiment also suffered 200 deaths and heavily injured. The medics forced to work without rest collapse from exhaustion, and four cases of soldiers losing it from the pressure happened in rapid succession.

Corpses were piled on top of corpses, and the blood stained ground were dyed with more red— they overcome all that and fought through the entire night.

「— They are falling back! Look, those guys are retreating!」

The morning of the fourth day. On the rocky terrain of the Second Block, one of the soldiers who fought all night shouted. He could see

the Igsem forces attacking throughout the night withdrawing from the block.

「They are really falling back…」「Because it's morning?」「We held on to the end… right?」

The troops whispered in surprise. However, Matthew's stern voice came from behind:

「Stay alert! Nothing's over!」

Their officers warning made the soldiers raise their weapons. However— with the break of dawn, the pudgey youth felt the same way as them. For the past three days, the Igsem faction would always attack en masse at night when the Air Rifles used by Matthew's forces were half as effective. And that was probably the last night.

「Reinforcement from the Remeon faction will arrive by evening… And then...」

Careful to not let his men hear him, Matthew muttered to himself— the Air Rifle was most effective during the day, when visibility was clear. With that in mind, it was unlikely for the enemy to approach the rocky terrain and risk suffering heavy losses.

「We just need to fend them off with suppressing fire, and wait for reinforcements… right?」

His heart wavered between staying on guard and being optimistic. Matthew wanted to hear his companions opinion, and looked behind him— and found a smoke column rising into the sky. It was the same sight as yesterday.

A red smoke signal was burning from the First Block, telling the Remeon faction our current location.

「Huff… Puff…」

The youth with an Air Rifle on his shoulder stepped into the headquarters with ragged breath. Aside from the minimal clear

passageway, the cave was full of heavily injured soldiers. This space was filled with odor of the casualties and their blood.

「I'm back for a break, Ik-kun……」

When he said that, two of his comrades deep in the cave turned to him. They were Ikuta and Haro who had dark eye circles. Recognizing the youth, the dark haired youth waved.

「Sit down and rest, Torway. That pretty face you are so proud of is a mess.」

「Ahaha, same to you. Haro-san, you have it hard too… Can you still hold out?」

「T-This is a piece of cake!」

Haro showed a strong front, but quickly lowered her head when Ikuta looked at her sternly.

「… I want to say that, but I couldn't stand up steady, so Ikuta-san stopped me from working, and wants me to rest for a while.」

She smiled with a tired face. And the next moment— Haro remembered something and blushed, then backed away from the two of them:

「Don't come too close to me. I stink so badly of sweat and blood, that I can't even tell the difference…」

「Alright, it's decided. I will hug you tightly. Haro, can you come closer?」

「Hyaa! A-After I clean myself first! I'm going to rest now…!」

Haro ran off like a hare, and collapsed on the straws laid out deep inside the cave. After glancing at her from the side, Ikuta took out two rations from the crate by his feet.

「Take a bite, Torway. Then sleep, you can rest for at least an hour.」

「Yes, I will. What about you, Ik-kun?」

「She's probably awake. Since both of us are the commander-in-chief, so I will fight it out to the end against her.」

The youth answered with a smile, then got up from his chair.

「I will get some fresh air, holler if you receive any emergency reports.」

Ikuta told the youth, then walked out of the headquarters. He looked over the rocky hills at the Seventh Block that had fallen, and sighed heavily.

「…Suya—」

He clenched his fists, thinking about his adjutant who didn't return and called out her name… He had an inkling of the reason why she misjudged the timing to retreat.

「What a tenacious battle.」

Suddenly, a respectful voice that had a scornful undertone came from the side. The youth turned stiff and looked around him. After confirming that his trusted soldiers were watching, he turned towards the voice:

「What is it, fox? I already ask you to not leave your quarters.」

「You did, but you don't expect me to listen, right? I can't stand the stench there, and since the battle is at a lull for now, I came out to relax a bit.」

Trisnai said without missing a beat, and stretched his arms like he said he would. He shook his head in response to the youth's cold gaze:

「Don't worry, I didn't approach the Third Princess. No, I did try, but got stopped by the guards every single time. Their Captain… Warrant Officer Hargunska? I'm really stumped, she won't even listen to me.」

「She is someone who can ignore logic and move according to her instincts. Compared to people with some smarts, she's more suited to keep you at bay.」

Ikuta hid the fact that he had a hard time dealing with Warrant Officer Lucanti for the same reason, and grunted.

「I will warn you first, you can act out the role of a mastermind if you want, but don't activate your men recklessly. If you want the Rising Sun Regiment to win, then don't interfere.」

The fox didn't answer and continued smiling. Ikuta continued:

「You want us to win, right? If you want the Igsem to win, you don't have to instigate the Remeon faction to start a coup. If you want the Remeon faction to win, you would have supported the coup right from the start. Either way, there isn't a need for a third faction to butt in. The only possibility left is that you want us to win, or your goal is the chaos from the three factions fighting each other.」

The youth analyzed calmly, without shifting his eyes from his opponent.

「That last option would be a hassle. If destruction is your goal, then this is a lost cause. But that doesn't seem to be true. You saw something before this civil war happened. And for some reason, you are trying to exploit the Princess and the Rising Sun Regiment— leaving that reason aside from now, I'm very sure that's what's going on.」

Ikuta declared. The fox's smile deepened towards the end, but he still held his peace.

「And you don't seem willing to settle things peacefully, and is bent on pulling house Igsem down from the military. Is the reason the same as my father's death? To get an army that is more compromising to the nobles?

That's foolish. The Katjvarna Empire managed to survive until now because of the absolute loyalty of house Igsem towards the royal family. When the head of the military becomes compromising, the government will quickly devolve into a military junta. This much is obvious to anyone.」

Ikuta said to inflict as much humiliation as possible. Trisnai shook his head quietly.

「It is as you say, the Igsem are outstanding guard dogs. You can even call them perfect. But don't you think that is the reason behind the rot in the Empire?」

His abnormal logic made the youth frown. The fox started to preach:

「Just leave everything to the guard dog, and everything will be fine— because of that retarded and optimistic thinking, generations of Emperors stopped thinking about things, and assumed that sitting on the throne without thinking or guiding the people is the ideal situation. And that is the start of the Empire's decline.」

Ikuta had no objections. He held the same view for just this point.

「The Igsem should have realized this a long time ago. But they neglected to stop the depravity of their masters, isn't that an unforgivable crime in itself? They turned a blind eye to the slow rot of their master, and continued serving the Emperor as usual. I won't permit them to call themselves loyalist and be the mainstay of the Imperial Army.」

That surprised the youth. The way he assigned the blame from the same perspective was too different from the youth.

「… You are saying they should give advice from their position as vassals? That's the responsibility of ministers like you. And you didn't stop at turning a blind eye, you even used the Emperor like your puppet.」

Ikuta pointed out as this ridiculous logic made his head hurt. Something unexpected happened. The fox lost his smile, and his face turned sad.

「It might be true for the previous generations of Emperors, but for the reigning Emperor… It was too late.」

「… What?」

Feeling goosebumps from the expression he saw for the first time, the youth asked. Trisnai closed his eyes.

「When I started to serve His Majesty, his mental conditions were already on the verge of failing. All my attempts to let the Emperor regain the light in his heart failed. If this went on, he would be known throughout history as a foolish Emperor— hence, I had to let the Emperor become this way.」

That was as good as admitting that he was the one who turned the Emperor into an invalid.

「I had to protect the reputation of my lord from being tarnished by unsculpted ministers. The Igsem could never understand how much it pains me. Because they are only protecting the position of authority known as the Emperor, and didn't care if His Majesty is incompetent, foolish or a puppet. They are content if the Emperor still holds on to power. Hence, they accepted the imperial edicts without question. Since there are royals who can take the throne, it's fine for His Majesty to get caught in the war and die— their arrogance knows no bounds.」

Trisnai said with a trembling voice and clenched his fists, showing pure rage:

「That isn't loyalty, and can never be seen as such. By taking the Emperor lightly, the Igsem lost the right to call themselves loyal vassals.

And of course, the bureaucrats are just as guilty, so it's great that they got purged too. Because they had been relying on the Igsem all

this time. The people General Remeon got rid of were eyesores to me too.」

The fox stated casually with a refreshing expression. Ikuta interjected and asked:

「— Wait. Going by that, you are the only noble who wants the Igsem to fall from grace? Even before my father died?」

「I can't say that I'm the only one, but if we get enough ministers to agree, we can just dismiss the Igsem with an edict, there's no need to lay such an obvious trap. But even then— the power struggle in the courts isn't so simple.」

The fox muttered with a face of nostalgia. The emotions drained from Ikuta's face.

「The one who killed my father… Isn't the cabinet back then, but you?」

「The truth is more complicated, but let's go with that.」

With that mysterious explanation, Trisnai didn't speak anymore. After glaring at that face for some time, Ikuta pulled his eyes away and intentionally took a deep breath. In the current situation, there wasn't any time for him to act rashly because of his personal emotions— He convinced himself with that, and got back on topic.

「I want to ask one question. What do you think… the Emperor is?」

「A living god.」

<TL: https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E7%8F%BE%E4%BA%BA%E7%A5%9E>

Ikuta gasped as Trisnai answered without any hesitation. His face was as innocent as a boy that likes to dream.

「The absolute ruler with limitless love and boundless wisdom. The ultimate being far superior than others. This truth is as steady as

bedrock. A symbol of power that only those who are worthy may wield.

The founding Emperor Luciaro swept away an army of ten thousand with a wave of his arm. The second Emperor Sanghiari could summon rain as he wished onto the drought stricken land. With powers beyond the intelligence of humanity, they bend reality and create miracles. And now, it is just an old and rusted post, guarded by dogs over the generations, which covers the brilliance that an Emperor should have.」

A sense of fear ran down Ikuta's spine. He realized from the fox's mesmerized face that he truly believe in the nonsensical myths of the royal lineage. And he was serious about making that a reality again.

Seeing the fear in the youth, Trisnai added with a smile:

「I admit the historical texts have some exaggerations, but there is no doubt that the mysterious lineage is passed down through the royal line. Just like the outstanding intellect of Princess Chamille you are so familiar with, isn't that the tip of the royal prowess?

However— to awaken the slumbering bloodline, the dogs need to be purged. Her Majesty can then feel the imminent danger, and then assign new dogs to protect her. They can't be loyal dogs like the Igsem, but dangerous mutts she needs to be wary of. Her Majesty could then make the mutt submit to her will, and order it around as she please— that will be the start of a correct master servant relationship.」

Trisnai's emotional voice believed that his action was just. The youth backed away with a feeling of revolt.

「Do you understand? To awaken the true form of the lineage of the Eternal Sprite Tree, and make the Empire great again— that's my only wish.」

Trisnai said loudly, then composed himself immediately. He stared at Ikuta firmly.

「After sharing all that, I will give you one more chance— destroy the Igsem, Ikuta Sankrei. When you do that, Princess Chamille will take the throne, and you will lead the new Imperial Army as her right hand man.」

At this point, the youth finally understand that he was serious.

「Let me be frank, stop being foolish and pretend to be her guardian. You understand too, right? The Princess is destined to take the throne. Shouldn't we devote ourselves to letting her take that path? Fame and fortune will be within your reach, and you will be remembered throughout history as the most outstanding general of them all!」

Their talking points didn't cross each other, like two parallel lines. Ikuta shook his head with a displeased face.

「… Is leaving your name in the history books that important to you? I'm fine with leaving mine on my tombstone. Since you said that much, let me be frank too. That's enough, don't trouble others with your delusions. You are an adult, so take responsibility for your own actions, leave the Princess out of this.」

The youth didn't hold back and pointed out the gulf between their view of the situation. The moment he heard this response— Trisnai's face lost its warmth, and became as emotionless as the time when he spoke about the Princess in the basement.

「So you want to relegate Her Highness to a mere peasant?」

「I only have one answer. That girl isn't your toy.」

「Of course she is not my toy, she should be my Mistress. And she thinks highly of you— don't you understand? After I explained so much, you still won't correct your wrong way of thinking?」

Ignoring his delusional words, Ikuta turned his back to the fox and walked away. Since the other party was a madman, there was no point in talking.

「— Such a pity. So you don't understand either.」

Trisnai muttered with gloomy disappointment.

Nine in the morning. The soldiers in the frontlines saw movement in the enemy camp, and reported to Ikuta.

「Please look at this.」

On top of the First Block, the youth looked down at the direction pointed out by the soldier. The abnormality was obvious, the Igsem soldiers were bustling between the two Blocks that had fallen. They were moving in and out and piling something up.

「They are filling in the space between the Fifth and Seventh Blocks with wood. It's not visible from here, but the same thing is happening between the Fifth and Eighth Block. We tried to disrupt them by firing shots, but they just started moving behind the wood they piled up, so it wasn't very effective.」

「A battalion just arrived from the north and got to work immediately. That seemed to be a unit sending timber in. If they are building a makeshift fort, it is a little too late to start now…」

The soldier tilted his head puzzledly, and Ikuta shook his head.

「… Those aren't building materials, but firewood. And half of those should be freshly cut logs that hadn't dry completely.」

「Ahh— firewood? They want to start a fire there?」

The dark haired youth ignored the confused soldiers and continued:

「I had always thought that the enemy soldiers in the day seem too small in numbers. When we start the defensive battle, they probably sent a battalion to the forest and village nearby to gather logs, and finally brought back the necessary numbers today.」

「I see… But, what does this mean? This isn't a terrain susceptible to fire attacks.」

Instead of a direct answer, Ikuta looked to the sky and asked quietly.

「Do you think the will of the heavens is with me?」

The troops couldn't answer this sudden question, and the youth continued with his eyes to the sky.

「During the crucial moments, will the heavens be on my side? I heard the legendary Captain Garciev made it through desperate situations through divine aid, and was a man loved by the wind and tides for his entire life.

Sigh— from a scientific perspective, this is just consequentialism. The qualities of a human won't affect the weather. It is possible to predict the weather with the experiences of a sailor, but that's a completely different matter.」

Ikuta said with a tone of a dispassionate teacher and sighed softly.

「Luck refers to an outcome, and not a quality someone possess. Even if a lucky person exist, the law of probabilities won't just go out of wink around him. The probability of getting heads in a coin toss is one out of two. And naturally, the results will be the same no matter who tossed it.」

His eyes wavered in the air, and shortly after, he turned his entire body in the opposite direction. The light red column of smoke appeared before him. That was the smoke signal he was sending to the Remeon faction.

「In this sense, this situation is no different from tossing a coin, with complicated conditions. The key will be the strength, direction, and persistence. There is nothing any human can do about that.」

The youth concluded quietly. What I can do is to be prepared for everything, including the worst case scenario— Ikuta thought, and

his attention returned from the sky to the ground, as he told the troops around him:

「Relay my words to the commanders in all the Blocks. This is the plan for the final battle.」

「We have set up the firewood, Lieutenant Colonel Igsem! Eight soldiers were shot in the leg during the process, but they were all light wounds!」

Confirming that the work was done, Major Megu reported to the commander immediately.

Most of the Igsem forces were spread out in the northern side of the blocks, between the Fifth, Seventh and Eighth Blocks they had captured in the last three days. They exerted pressure towards the First and Second Blocks from the north, but after daybreak, they didn't launch any attacks except for suppressing fire.

「Leave three fire platoons to light the fire, and pull the unit that set up the place to the north. After linking up with that unit, execute the orders I had given previously」

「Yes. When the gong sounds, we will launch an all out attack.」

The Major answered the vermillion haired girl to confirm the plan. However— the Major's eyes rest on the opposite direction of the entrenched enemy.

「… But even so, this is the fourth day of battle. The Remeon faction might appear beyond the horizon at any moment… Will we get our chance before that?」

Major Megu had a hint of unease, worries and other emotions in his words. Megu didn't know what kind of outcome to hope for.

「There's no point in wondering if it will come. We can only get ready for the moment the opportunity arises.」

The girl from the Igsem house answered accurately, cutting away the weakness of her subordinate. Major Megu nodded mechanically. Those who work under her had no time to worry.

11.00 am. The dark haired youth could see the smoke signal rising straight up.

12.00 pm. The flag fluttered a little before the vermillion haired girl, like an afterthought.

1.00 pm. In the tense atmosphere, the troops on both sides started to think that the battle will end with this final clash.

1.32 pm. The wind blowing from the north sent the smoke signal drifting southwards.

「……」

1.40 pm. The flag fluttered in the increasingly strong wind, and didn't droop again.

「——」

1.55 pm. The smoke signal drifted south, and the flags fluttered even more strongly in the wind.

「Light the fire.」

The Igsem fire troops lit the stack of wood alight on command. The large number of lumber caught on fire at the same time, and the moisture in the semi dry wood mixed within started to evaporate.

2.06 pm. As the wind brushed against their faces, the commanders of both forces grasp the situation at the same time.

「Strong north wind—」

The youth saw this as the worst situation.

「Strong north wind—」

The girl viewed this as the best opportunity.

2.11 pm. The gong that announced the final battle rang loudly under the blue sky.

「Woah…!」

It happened suddenly, and Matthew stood stiffly from surprise.

The grey smog flowed in like a tsunami, and covered the surroundings in no time. They couldn't see the enemy on the Seventh Block before them, and the silhouette of their comrades on the Second Block was also blurry. When their field of vision became restricted, the soldiers cried out with unease.

The smog from the Igsem's burning pile of wood flowed towards them along with the northern wind. Given the amount of wood, the smoke seemed too thick, and that was because half of the wood that was burned wasn't completely dry yet. In order to achieve similar results, the Igsem faction mixed in impurities into the fire. The smell of the smog was different from normal bonfires.

「C-Calm down! This is within our expectations!」

The pudgey youth shouted, and he did so to convince himself. Yes, he did expect that, and that was exactly why he knew that the sight before him was the worst thing that could happen.

「All units, prepare to engage the enemy! They are going to charge right in!」

The soldiers' faces looked tense as they pointed their trembling muzzles to the front.

「Ready, aim— fire!」

On his command, countless explosion of compressed air erupted at the same time— this was the beginning of their hell.

「Begin the charge.」

After the order for an all out offensive was issued, the Igsem faction troops started to move. The air that had been dyed grey covered their tracks, as they advance onto the central blocks to launch their final attack.

「「「「「「「Wwooooaaahhh!」」」」」」」


岩石地帯　戦場図
北風
陥落
薪
薪
5
ブロック
7
ブロック
陥落
陥落
8
ブロック
バリケード
1
ブロック
2
ブロック
3
ブロック
4
ブロック
バリケード
バリケード
洞窟＝司令部
6
ブロック
煙幕
N
S

A smoke screen. The vermillion haired girl used a simple but effective trick.

In this battle, the defences of the Rising Sun Regiment rested on two pivotal points. First was the range and accuracy of the Air Rifles, and the second was the quick and constant light communication between the blocks. The Igsem faction had been attacking in the night for the sake of halving the effectiveness of the former.

However, this was already the fourth day of the battle, and reinforcements from the Remeon faction would likely arrive before night falls. They could not attack at dusk anymore, so the Igsem had to attack during the day.

That was why the vermillion haired girl created darkness with her own hands. A grey darkness that was darker than the night.

What decided the effectiveness of the smoke screen were the wind direction, wind intensity, and how long it lasted. All these factors were left up to fate, no one could predict if a strong, persisting north wind would occur. If a southern wind picks up, then the Igsem had to shift their logs in a new location, which would take a lot of time.

However— before waiting for the whims of fate to smile in their favor, there was much preparation to be done. First was to gather firewood, which could only be done in the latter part of the battle. The limited number of people sent to move the wood meant this couldn't be done again easily. They also need to capture the neighboring blocks in order to pile up the wood without being harassed. If they start the fire too far away, the smoke would dissipate before reaching the target blocks.

It was no coincidence that they seized the 5th, 7th and 8th blocks from the start. The vermillion haired girl had this plan in mind from the beginning, and the dark haired youth did everything he could to avoid this situation from happening. But he still couldn't hold on to one of these three blocks for four days.

No one could accuse him of not performing better. The youth withstood the relentless attack by the vermillion haired girl for three whole days, and holding on to the central blocks for so long was a commendable achievement. The defensive battle wouldn't even be possible if a mediocre commander was in charge.

The conclusion of their drawn out battle had to be left to fate. The match between the youth and the girl had been even so far, and they had to depend on fate now. Which side the scales would tilt, would depend on the whims of the Goddess of War.

「Damn it, I can't see! I can't see the enemy!」

「It's not over yet! It still won't end…!」

In the greyish hell, the soldiers who lost their field of vision shouted out loud. It was as if night had fallen again, and their mind was slowly shrouded by a despair that seemed denser than the smoke screen itself.

「Don't fire recklessly, we will run out of ammo! Fire when the enemy closes in!」

As they had lost their advantage of range, their tactics had regressed to that of classic windgunners. Unlike the night where they could ensure visibility by using search lights, there was no way to overcome the cover of the smoke screen. Fighting in such overwhelming odds was their only choice.

「Messenger, request reinforcements from headquarters! If the light signals don't work, then run there! Hurry!」

At the same time, the enemy used the cover of the smoke screen and flooded to the areas that had not engaged in melee combat so far. In the Third Block which was the smallest of them all, the windgunners turned pale at the sight of the enemy suddenly appearing before them.

「Send a message to headquarters, enemy spotted in the Third Block! They are infiltrating the gap between the blocks!」

「Don’t let them destroy the barrier! It will be all over if they break through there!」

「But it’s hard to aim in the thick smoke—」

Visibility was so poor that they couldn’t tell if their shots were landing, which made the troops anxious. Their Officer Commanding, Captain Sezoi grit his teeth and turned around with determination:

「Since guns are useless— 3rd and 4th platoon, follow me! We will go down the block and switch to melee battle!」

「Wait, Officer Commanding Sir? Are you serious?」

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Officer_commanding>

「We are just expunging a small number of enemies! There’s no excuse not to!」

The Captain said firmly and strode forth in large strides. His men followed worriedly.

「— They are here! Take cover behind the rocks! Aim at the enemy and thrust〜〜!」

「「「「「Woaaahhh!」」」」」

The battlecries of the soldiers rang out. The bodies of the two opposing sides slammed into each other and they thrust their blades at each other and fell over together. As their shots were half effective, they were fighting in an intense hand to hand combat under the pudgey youth’s command.

「Shhyyaaa!」「Don’t falter, beat them off!」「Damn it, down! Go down!!」

As he directed his subordinates on the verge of panicking, the slightly plump youth in command kept his cool. Seeing that the vanguard had fended off the wave of attack, he blinked his bloodshot eyes and attempted to grasp the situation.

「That was the third wave of attack…! All platoon, casualty report!」

「First platoon, 5 injured! 2 of them are heavily wounded!」 「Second platoon, 3 dead, damn it! 2 heavily wounded!」 「Third platoon, 4 dead! 6 gravely injured!」

The number of casualties reported by his subordinates kept increasing, and they were bleeding out. At this moment, Matthew who was burning with anxiety heard a voice from behind. It was the roving snipers from Torway's unit.

「We are here to reinforce you, Captain Matthew! Where should we go?」

「Good! Link up with the Second Platoon first—」

As he was about to issue an order, he was drowned out by intense shouts. Countless footsteps came from the slope, and Matthew opened his eyes wide and shouted:

「They are charging again! Stand firm—!」

Before the warning reached the ears of the troops, the enemy was coming again.

「U-Uwahh!」 「Hyyaaa—!」

They concentrated on the weak point created in the previous attack, and the unit that suffered heavy losses were suppressed. A few enemies broke through the line, and charged through the smoke into the west side of the rocky terrain, straight at the commander, Matthew.

「Captain, watch out!」

Noticing their superior was in danger, the soldiers rushed towards him. The incoming enemy made the pudgey youth back away, planning to lean against the boulder at the western end to steady himself—

「—Ahh?」

Matthew felt a sense of weightlessness— and realized that behind him was an empty space.

「Captain Matthew is injured! First Lieutenant Tabruchi has taken command of the Second Block's defences—!」

Ikuta felt a chill run down his spine. Shortly after receiving this report, Matthew was brought into the headquarters on a stretcher. The dark haired youth and Haro immediately rushed to his side.

「Matthew, where are you hit?」

「I-I didn't get hit! I just fell off a boulder, tis but a scratch… Ughh!」

Matthew answered strongly, but his uniform was in tatters, and he was bleeding from the places where he hit the rocks. After checking his wounds, Haro shook her head with a serious face.

「It's mostly contusions, but he fractured his right leg. I will get a splint—」

「Just bandage it, and help me up here! I have to return to my post…!」

The two of them stopped Matthew who was trying to get up despite his injuries. At this moment, the pale faced jade eyed youth rushed to the three of them from the north side of the block:

「Ik-kun, Haro-san! How's Ma-chan's wounds?」

「He hurt his leg, but nothing life threatening! How's the Second Block?」

「Most of my unit went over to reinforce them, we can hold out for a while longer! But this time, from the front—」

Angry shouts came from behind the youth. Without waiting for him to explain, Ikuta could feel looming defeat from their voices.

「The wind direction is the decisive element, huh—」

The reserves unit had formed up neatly between the 7th and 5th block. Major Megu stood beside the vermillion haired girl and muttered as they look down at the enemy formation. The end of this battle was in sight.

「The battle is decided, Lieutenant Colonel. With this, it won't be long before—」

A few soldiers charged in before the Major could finish. This group that was patrolling to the far north of the battlefield took a short moment to catch their breath, then spoke quickly:

「Lieutenant Colonel Igsem, a report! A Remeon faction army of 3000 is approaching from the north northwest! At their current pace, they are estimated to reach in an hour!」

Major Megu face became twisted. This news meant their certain victory had escaped their grasp.

「To show up at this time…!」

Receiving this report with her back still turned, the girl from Igsem said quietly.

「Fire Troops First Company, fix bayonets.」

The soldiers executed the orders immediately. Realizing what her intentions were a few seconds later, Major Megu started to tremble.

「… Are you going to charge in personally!?」

There wasn't any need to ask. Even without news of the Remeon faction approaching, she had planned to do so from the very start. The enemy defences were solid, and there was no telling when the wind would change direction. They shouldn't be satisfied with being one step away from victory, and go for the prize instead.

「Lead your unit and cover that block with suppressing fire. I will then lead my men and charge into the heart of the enemy formation and take down the enemy commander swiftly— and slay Ikuta Sankrei.」

The girl declared with an unwavering tone. The Major finally realized how shallow and foolish it was to advise against her resolve.

「… I won't stop you. It can be done if it is you.」

Major Megu said with a sigh, then closed both eyes with a pained expression.

「We lost too many fellow soldiers in this war… I want to end this here. I can't take any more of this.」

The Major looked at the girl with a groan, and saluted with back straightened:

「I will leave everything to you. End this, young Igsem.」

コミック版『アルデラミン』作者 川上泰樹 特別寄稿

TAIKI KAWAKAMI PRESENTS



「The road block between the First and Second Blocks is on fire! We can't put it out, it won't last much longer!」

When the messenger barged in and said that, the members of the Knight Corps all froze.

This was like a bell announcing that the fated moment has come, echoing heavily in Ikuta's heart.

「…… Phew〜…」

The youth put both hands on his hips and took a deep breath to calm himself. He looked up at the grey skies, imagining the view from the sky looking down on his position. The fourth day of the defensive battle, a little after 4pm. By last night, three of the blocks to the north had fallen, and the central blocks, including the headquarters, were now open to direct attacks. With the first block having few paths leading outside because of its cliff-like slopes, the enemy had to concentrate their attacks on the Second Block, attempting to break through the barriers between the two blocks.

Of the 2,400 soldiers on the defensive side, there was just a little over a thousand still combat fit. Half of them were assigned to the defence of the Second Block, and he was slowly withdrawing his forces from the fourth and sixth blocks to the south. The objective was to gather their remaining forces and strengthening their defence of the center.

Of the three road barriers, the two to the south, on either side of the Third block were still standing. Even if the enemy attack en masse, they could hold out for quite a while. The problem was the north. Affected by the smoke screen from the Fifth and Seventh Blocks, the enemy had stepped up the intensity of their attacks. That barrier would get destroyed by fire in about ten minutes.

He imagined the development after the barrier falls— Behind the barriers were three layers of defensive cover made from stone. By making use of these covers, their forces could halt the enemy

invasion. The available forces were 300 Luminous troops and 20 snipers, as well as support from the two neighboring blocks. The accuracy of the shots would be affected by the smoke screen, but the enemy's attack corridor was narrowed, even if they broke through the barrier, and if dealt with adequately, holding out for an hour was very possible.

「And of course, she wouldn't let me do as I wish.」

Ikuta immediately banished any naive assumptions— Assuming that the Remeon faction would be approaching soon, Yatori wouldn't settle for a drawn out battle, and would strike right for the heart. She would bring as powerful a force as she could manage, and come right for his head.

Which means, for this plan to work, he would need the best frontline commander there was.

「— Ahh—」

He wasn't faltering or afraid, but his body was trembling for no reason.

「— I'm glad.」

The youth who might not survive the hour muttered to himself.

「Torway, come here.」

With his heart set, Ikuta waved at the jade-eyed youth and Torway walked over with a nod.

With the battle reaching its end, the two of them discussed their plans for the last time.

Feeling uneasy but unable to go outside, Princess Chamille paced around the tent deep inside a shallow cave.

「Ugghh…!」

She groaned, and the index finger she was biting started to bleed.

It was unbearable. The members of the Knight Corp were risking their lives in battle, but she couldn't do anything aside from waiting.

The anxiousness and dizzying feeling of helplessness was driving her insane.

「— Princess.」

A call came from outside the tent. The girl ran to the entrance and pulled up the screen without any hesitation.

「Solork…! I-Is everyone safe? How's the battle, have we linked up with the Remeon faction—」

She went to Ikuta who had entered the tent and asked a series of questions. The youth shook his head with a stoic face.

「The Knight Corp members are fine, but things aren't going too well… and the situation is more dire than I imagined, so we have to make preparations, just in case.」

The way he put it felt ominous. Ikuta continued plainly before the Princess who had turned stiff:

「Do you know the procedure to request for clemency from death?」

The girl opened her eyes wide from surprise. Could it be— they were already at the stage where they had to beg for mercy from the enemy?

Realizing that she was mistaken, Ikuta explained:

「It's not for me or the Princess. If it really comes down to this, they would definitely spare you, a royal, and will find any reason to execute me, the rebel. The problem is our comrades who are on the borderline— how much would they be persecuted for their part as rebels.」

The Princess understood what he meant, and the youth continued:

「First on the list would be Matthew, Haro and Torway. Major Sazarf, Major Melza and other field grade officers couldn't escape responsibility by saying 『I'm just following orders』. Depending on how the court martial goes, they might all get executed. To avoid

that, we have to depend on the Princess to request clemency from death.」

He was talking about tying up loose ends after losing the battle. The girl covered her ears and shook her head.

「Don't say it… Stop saying it, Solork! I don't want to hear it, I don't want to hear it! I don't want to hear about a future that assumes that you will die…!」

「I understand. Sorry for frightening you… But we have to discuss this right now.」

Ikuta said with a serious face, then looked behind him.

「I'm going to meet Yatori.」

「——」

「This is the final battle. I can declare that I will win if it is any other opponent, but I can't do that against her. Even if it is just a verbal assurance, I can't promise you that I will win. That's why… I have to tell you this right now, and think about what to do in the event that I lose.」

She reached her limits after hearing that. The Princess lost all self restraint, and the emotions she had been holding back all this time exploded.

「Then— then don't go!」

When she realized it, she was shouting out loud. The Princess pounced on him, burying her face into his stomach and pleaded:

「Stop fighting! Just surrender now. I will handle the death clemency and everything else! Even if I have to prostrate and eat mud, I won't let them execute you…!」

Tears blurred her vision, and her slender arms hurt from her attempt to make the youth stay.

「If— If I hold you tightly like this, then they can't kill you, right? If I stay with you at all times, then no one can harm you! I will do just that! I won't let go, let go of your warmth…!」

The Princess clutched the chest of the youth and spilled her guts out. She held on stubbornly, as if she would fall off a cliff if she let go.

After a moment of silence— Ikuta knelt down so they were at eye level, and said quietly:

「… Princess, I'm going to realize my dream later.」

「……! …!」

「Letting her live the life that she wish— that was what I always wanted. So I'm willing to risk my life so she can continue to be Yatorishino, instead of becoming a nameless and generic Igsem.」

After telling the Princess where his conviction lies, the youth continued seriously:

「I can't promise you that I will survive. But, I will definitely return, and bring her back with me. Because— that is your wish too. For Haro, Matthew and Torway too… A wish all of us have in common.」

He then gently pushed the girl aside, and she didn't resist. The arms holding on to the youth had lost their strength.

「… I'm going now.」

After saying what he had too, Ikuta patted the girl's head, then turned and left.

「Solork……!」

Not turning back at her last cry, he kept his eyes forward and walked out of the tent.

His subordinates formed up in the center of the base silently awaited the youth after he finished his last task at hand.

「Sorry for the wait, are the preparations done?」

An officer stepped out of the ranks and answered:

「All the forces available had been gathered to form an overstrength company. Captain Torway's unit is in place too.」

After saying that, that officer saluted and proffered a crossbow. The youth received it, and installed his partner Luminous sprite onto it with practiced movements.

「Let's go, Kusu.」

「Yes… We will make it through this, Ikuta.」

Smiling in reply to Kusu's concern, he took the first step onward to the final battle. The platoons who had their orders hurried to their posts, and the youth followed behind.

「Hold it right there!」

Suddenly, an easy to recognize footsteps chased from behind him. Ikuta turned around with a wry smile, and see the pudgey youth who was bandaged all over standing there with his clutches. As if to show his determination to fight despite his injuries, he had a windgun secured to his shoulders.

「You jerk, don't decide everything on your own! I said I want to fight too…!」

Matthew wanted to argue angrily, but a pair of arms grabbed him from behind. A female medic taller than him showed up with a determined face.

「What— Hey?」

「Sorry, Matthew-san!」

With that apology, Haro tightened her arms around his neck, cutting off the blood flow to the pudgey youth's brain.

「— Guahh—!」

The position and pressure she applied was on point, and Matthew couldn't even scream in pain. He was rendered unconscious without any resistance, and collapsed. Ikuta sighed with relief.

「Thank you, Haro… When he wakes up, tell him that I owe him one.」

Haro took care of the pudgey youth, then looked at the youth who was leaving with uneasy eyes.

「Ikuta-san… Ikuta-san! You… You will come back, right?」

He stopped in the middle of his strides. Ikuta was quiet for a moment, then answered in a slightly stiff tone:

「Clear the map on the table and brew some tea. For six people.」

This was the best answer he could give. Ikuta then left for real this time, and said to his waiting men in the tone of a commander:

「Fourth Luminous troops company, First to Fourth Platoon, deploy in the front of the stronghold, and engage the incoming enemy when the roadblock falls. The Fifth to Eighth Platoon, formed up behind them and prepare for the same thing.」

The overstrength company had 300 odd men. The soldiers went to their posts.

「If you can't hold the defence line, then fall back to the next position behind. Retreat in as tidy a formation as possible, and don't do anything rash without my orders.」

With the preparations done, Ikuta cast his gaze to the north. He looked at the roadblock that might fall apart from the fire at any moment, then took a deep breath.

「Okay, it's time— all units, fix bayonets!」

The entire group fixed a short spear to the end of their crossbows with a clink. The familiar sound and weight in their hands transformed all of them into soldiers.

The Igsem soldiers waited quietly in front of the roadblock that was slowly burning up.

The vermillion haired girl stood in the middle of the group, with both hands on her hilts. Her crimson eyes stared at the enemy formation through the grey and hazy air.

Shortly after— from where she could see, the roadblock that had been holding up adamantly, started falling apart as if its strength had given up. The pioneers demolishing the roadblock under the smoke screen turned their backs to the blackening ruins and shouted the signal loudly.

A gust of wind blew from the side, seemingly on cue, and they could see the enemy formation clearly for a moment.

Before her eyes were a fort piled up with stones, and crossbowmen hiding behind cover. Further behind them was a young commander standing boldly on the fort.

For that instant, the two of them locked gaze.

「— Charge!」

The girl ordered as she drew her blades. The soldiers on the front ranks charged in unison at the direction the blade was pointed. The sound of the air whistling erupted, and numerous bolts came flying. The unlucky tens of soldiers were wounded, but the others quickened their pace and persevere on.

「「「「「Wooahhh!」」」」」

They charged towards the fort and return fire. As the battlefield was a close range combat with poor visibility, neither side had many windgunners. In their place, the Luminous troops and Fire troops clashed head on.

Bolts, light, bullets and howls. All these criss-crossed madly as both sides clashed in an intense battle.

「First platoon, shift more to the left! The enemy is targeting that side!」

Observing the enemy movements carefully, Ikuta made minute adjustment to the troops deployment. Since their forces available

were limited, the vermillion haired girl wouldn't launch such a simple offensive. Her goal was to break through on a single point between feints and real attacks.

Which part of the fort was attacked, and where was the opponent trying to force an opening— the accuracy of the information and his analysis couldn't even be a second late or a tiny bit off. Just one misstep would lead to defeat, that was what fighting her was like.

「Fourth platoon, decrease your firing coverage on the sides, and increase your intensity of fire! Give support fire from your flanks! The enemy is charging from the front, we can't hold out with the frontal defences alone!」

Every instruction was like walking on thin wire. His bold and accurate mobile defences were built on thin ice, and both the commanders and men shouldered equally heavy burden. They could hold out by deploying troops equally along all fronts— how relaxing it would be, if the enemy was so easy.

「Second platoon, engage in hand to hand combat! On your lights! 」

As the sun was bright and the smoke screen lingered, using searchlight to blind them was ineffective. It wouldn't be entirely meaningless, but all the veterans knew that creating a moment of opening at close range might be the difference between life and death.

「Third platoon, watch the right of the fort! Don't let them infiltrate under the cover of the smoke!」

From the perspective of the Ikuta, the commander, the terrible visibility was a big pain. He could grasp the movement of large groups, but it was hard to track small teams with his naked eyes. He had to predict the parts he couldn't see, and leave the final decision to his subordinates. The condition was the same for the vermillion

haired girl, as both sides pushed their imaginations to the limits in order to read the move made by the other.

「Shyaa—!」

Aside from the harshness of the battle, the soldiers fighting desperately on the frontlines faced another type of pain. After impaling the enemy with his short spear, one soldier realized that.

「K-Kuft… You…」

He called out to the man coughing up blood before him— they were friends.

The two had ate, drank, and entrusted their lives to each other on the battlefield, a friendship forged through wars. The wound was obviously fatal to anyone, and he couldn't extract the spear carelessly.

「Hey, that hurts, Remarga……」

With that dying words, Fire trooper Private First Class Kuft Hosa fell over limbly. Witnessing the death of his friend in his hands, Luminous trooper Private First Class Remarga Kaitsuru was too shocked to move— before he could snap out of it, he was stabbed in the back by another soldier, and died. The two corpses laid down side by side on a blood stained boulder.

Similar situations were happening all over the place. This wasn't the first civil war between Imperial forces, but the units clashing this time were the direct subordinates of the dark haired youth and vermillion haired girl. The two understood and trust each other more than anyone else, and this was reflected in the intimate relationship between their subordinates. Which means— They were pointing their blades at their irreplaceable battle buddies.

「U-Uwahh—」 「Hiee… Ahh…!」

The soldiers groaned in pain. Half of it from fear of death, and the other from the fear of hurting their comrades. But they had to retaliate when attacked, so casualties continued piling on both sides.

「「「「「「「「Uwahhhh―!」」」」」」」」

Killing was hell, being killed was hell too. The civil war cumulate in this final battle, and they clashed with each other in tears.

Ikuta's men were fully committed to defence, but even with their valiant efforts, their defence line was still gradually pushed back. After abandoning the first defences, the situation became more dire. The Igsem faction started using the cover instead, and pushed the starting point of their charge forward.

「……」

As she looked sternly at the enemy formation that was constricting slowly, Yatori took out her pocket watch to check. Almost forty minutes had passed since the scouts reported sighting of the Remeon faction, there was just a little over twenty minutes left.

In that instant, she made up her mind— the battle had to be decided now.

「Send in all the forces— We will break through the center of the enemy defences, and subjugate their headquarters.」

The men showed determined faces. They had been waiting for this order.

「First, Second and Third platoon, move out with me in the first wave. Fourth and Fifth platoon, don't leave any gap and follow right behind.」

She increased the grip on her blades, set her eyes forward, then leaned to the front and prepared to sprint.

With all the preparations done, the girl took in a deep breath, and—

「— Charge!」

Like an arrow loose from a bow, her men sprinted madly. Even in this uneven grounds, her strides remained steady. They charged through the peltering hail of bullets and reached the enemy's

foremost defence line. Without missing a beat, they rushed up the slope and assailed the enemy's second defence line that was just starting to withdraw.

「「「「「「「「Waaarrrggghhhhhh!」」」」」」」」

The charge started at impeccable timing. The remaining soldiers in the line couldn't muster their forces to fend off the charge, and those retreating to the third defence line were run down without any resistance.

「Stop the charge! Form up with the comrades around you!」

After sweeping the area, she waited a few seconds to link up with the leading elements. When her men recognized the situation, the Igsem girl didn't hesitate launching another charge towards the third defence line.

「—Incoming!」

Because of the smoke screen, Ikuta who had retreated further back couldn't see what his opponent was doing directly. But he sensed it. From the panic of the soldiers falling back, the intense sound of fighting from the second line and the imposing silence that followed immediately— These were all signs that the vermillion haired girl was coming.

「The four platoons behind, spread out and prepare to pincer attack from the sides! Don't block their charge! Lay out the red carpet for her!」

The youth issued his instructions, then turned and ran in the opposite direction of the enemy charge. With his back turned towards her, he fled together with the platoon under his direct command, and headed towards the hazy destination.

「Tch—!」

The flash of her blades took another life. In the last defence line, the three soldiers she cut down collapsed onto the floor. She twisted

her body to dodge the bolts flying from the side, and cut down the crossbowman immediately.

「Leave the suppression of this place to our comrades! We will head directly—」

She stopped mid sentence. When she stepped over the boulder and looked, she saw an unexpected sight.

She was expecting a fierce counterattack by the enemy forming a horizontal line, and was prepared to charge into the enemy from the front. But the reality was different. There wasn't a horizontal defence line blocking their advance, but two vertical columns to the side, with Luminous troops armed with crossbows targeting the Igsem soldiers.

It was clear their deployment was made to surround the attackers. At the deepest end of the formation, there was only one unit spread out horizontally in front of the Igsem. It was the platoon under the direct command of the dark haired youth— and he was standing at their fore personally.

It was obvious. He was using this situation to send a clear message.

If you want my head, then get over here.

「— Found the enemy commander.」

After grasping the situation, the vermillion haired girl didn't hesitate for a single second:

「Continue the charge!」

「「「「「「「「Warrrggghhh!」」」」」」」」

The elite soldiers sprinted with a howl, running straight for the enemy commander. Their goal was to break through the center, and didn't even consider the round about way of breaking through the sides instead.

Massed windgunners aside, the Luminous troops armed with crossbows had insignificant firing rate. Even if they were attacked

from both sides, they wouldn't suffer serious casualties, so they just needed to charge right through.

「All platoons, forward! Grit your teeth, engage～～!」

And of course, the Luminous troops also knew that. They had no expectations of their bolts stopping the fierce attack of the enemy, and had to throw their entire body into completing this arduous task. The two columns clamped in from the sides when the charge began, like an alligator closing its jaws, and they engaged in melee combat. The moment they clashed, sparks flew as their weapons collided.

「Full speed ahead! Don't stop!」

The vermillion haired girl wasn't fazed. It was only natural for the enemy to encircle them, and she chose to break through from the front despite that. Close quarter combat was the Igsem's forte. In the face of an enemy that equalled them in numbers, they had no reason to stop.

「Ughhh—!」 「Arrgghh!」 「Damn it, get lost!」

However— Even though they didn't stop their feet, the inertia of their charge were still affected. The ones who had to engage the enemy attacking from the sides, and those who forged on ahead, had a difference in their speed. The platoon under the vermillion haired girl's direct command were even more isolated as they sped on ahead. They fended off the enemy's harassment efficiently, and was well ahead of the rest.

The Igsem girl already knew this was the youth's intention. Her platoon was allowed passage, and the youth set a trap for them once they were isolated— But despite knowing that, she didn't slow down. It would be a waste of time to wait for her comrades to catch up, and the enemy commander might flee to another block. There wasn't much time before the Remeon faction reaches, so they had to end this quickly.

If there was a trap, they just need to smash through it. The vermillion haired girl ran through the enemy grounds without any hesitation.

「Pull back! Keep up with me!」

In the rank formed by the soldiers at the very end, Ikuta was moving with the platoon under his direct command too. He moved to the south, and kept a distance from the leading elements of the pursuing enemy.

「Hah! Hah! Hah…!」

He kept running with ragged breath. He didn't run that far, but the accumulated fatigue and the smoke filled air made the limbs of the youth feel really heavy. He was supposed to reach the foot of the 3rd Block in one shot, but a strong sense of vertigo hit him midway, making him stagger.

「Commandant, get a hold of yourself!」

Ikuta almost fell over, and a Sergeant braced him up. Realizing he almost lost conscious, Ikuta quickly raised his head.

「Ah, sorry, I'm fine now—」

Bam! The moment he said that, he felt an impact on the lower half of his body.

「— Shyaa!」

With that strange impact, a scorching heat started to spread from his left leg. Ikuta whizzed as his leg felt as if he had stepped into a pit of fire.

「—W-What……」

The youth looked down, and understood everything.

A bolt had pierced his thigh.

「Ikuta—!」 「Commander?」

Kusu turned on the crossbow, and the sergeant who realized what happened turned pale. Ikuta steadied himself by grabbing on to the

shoulder of the sergeant, and attempted to sort out the situation through the intense pain— A bolt had hit the back of his thigh and got embedded inside. Blood started to stained his pants.

「— A stray bolt…」

He mumbled hoarsely. If it didn't hurt so much, the youth would want to laugh. The enemy was still far behind them, so that was definitely not an aimed shot. Someone fired the bolt at a high angle, and it miraculously hit him after drawing a high arc through the sky.

His forehead broke out in a cold sweat. I'm not favored by the heavens after all, Ikuta thought to himself– refusing aid from the medic, he started walking again.

「Commander? Please wait, your wound…!」

「No need. From the blood flow, it didn't hit the artery. It is obvious that the bolt can't be pulled out quickly.」

The youth answered plainly, and continued walking as he leaned on the Sergeant's shoulder. With every step, the bolt bit deeper into his flesh, and the searing pain crawled up his spine.

「……!」

Ikuta gritted his teeth and endured it, but forgot to breath— When he realized it, his conscious was fading into the darkness.

「— Hey, Ikuta. Promise your mother— four, things.」

A gentle voice entered my ears. In the dim charcoal making house, my mother laid on a make-shift bed.

She was too weak to get up, and her limbs were as frail as twigs— But even so, she still smiled for me.

「First— Don't, join the army.」

Mother pleaded in a trembling voice.

「Don't throw your life away… for the country, for justice, for those big things you can't see with your eyes. Don't, be like your father.」

I held her icy hands and tried to say something, but could only moan.

「Second— Don't, seek revenge. Don't ever think of avenging your father. The more you think about it, the further away you will drift from happiness.」

I shook my head, not daring to agree to this. I feared that the life would drain away from my mother the moment I nodded.

「Third— Slack off as much as you can. Given how hard your father had worked, it's fine for you to relax. From now on, your life has to be filled with joy.」

I couldn't accept this and stamp my feet. Then why couldn't the reward of that hard work be transferred to the woman before me instead? Why did it have to be me alone?

「Fourth— I need to ask, you, before that.」

Mother stared at me with her dark eyes. I understood that this was an important question, and straightened my back on reflex.

「In this few years, out of the people you had not met, who, do you want to meet the most?」

Aside from your father, mother added. I didn't have to think about this at all. I suppressed the sobbing in my throat, and stated a name.

As I expected— Mother muttered, and nodded with satisfaction.

「Go see her then. After you leave this place, it doesn't matter how much time it takes, you must see her. That is the first step towards your happiness.」

Mother said with a firm smile. Her light overwhelmed me. When mother showed such a face, whatever she said was always right.

「However— if, if that forthright child wandered too far down a thorny path, and gets trapped by the bounds of fate…」

Worry flashed across her eyes for an instant. She strengthened her grip onto my fingers, and said with her last bits of strength:

「If that time comes, then Ikuta, you have to stop her. Take that girl's hand, and guide her towards happiness.

If you walk together hand in hand, you will find the most important thing to you at the very end—」

His mother's words woke him up.

「— Ahhh!」

Ikuta exerted force on his legs. The intense pain from his thigh performed the task of an alarm clock, and Ikuta walked away from his subordinate who was propping him up.

「C-Commandant!」

When he regained consciousness, Ikuta looked to his back on reflex. The leading elements headed by the vermillion haired girl— was still some distance away. He blacked out for a very short time, and his subordinates had been dragging him all this while.

「… Let's go.」

The youth turned and walked forth. There was tens of meters to the destination. He used his last bit of strength and stamina and pushed his body that was as heavy as lead forward.

He staggered forth as he mumbled repeatedly— Wait over there. Think about her, and wait.

「Tch—!」

After cutting down the eighth man, the girl's field of vision cleared up suddenly.

They had cleared the last row of the enemy's column. No one was blocking their way, and in her blurred field of vision, there was only the enemy commander and his platoon of 40 men left.

In terms of numbers, she wasn't too different from them. The other platoons were still fighting valiantly behind, and they had only penetrated this deep despite knowing they would be cut off from the rest.

The last group of enemy was just a hundred meters away.

Once she close this distance, she could reach the end of this war. And kill the enemy commander who was standing with his back to the rocky hill —Ikuta Sankrei.

「——」

Her throat was parched. Her limbs went numb. Her lips wouldn't move all of a sudden.

Deciding that all this was because she was thirsty, the vermillion haired girl shouted at the top of her lungs:

「— Charge!」

With that order, she started running with her men holding crossbow armed with spears. Their goal was to close in on the enemy and kill them, so their actions were ordered and disciplined.

The vermillion haired girl went ahead with two sections, and three sections followed behind. She adopted this formation because she was certain there was a trap ahead. She didn't forget that her own platoon charging on ahead was the result guided by the enemy commander.

As for the trap, the girl had a good guess. Snipers. Since they started fighting here, the snipers had not showed up at all. Even if most of them were committed to the fight in the other blocks, it didn't make sense for Ikuta to not keep a small number behind in case of emergencies like this.

She was sure that the snipers would fire upon her when she closed in on the hundred meter mark. The girl was very certain as she watched her surroundings as she sprinted— Where would the snipers take aim from?

It couldn't be above the rocky hills on the sides. The smoke screen was thicker higher up, and their vision from above would be completely obscured. Even if the snipers were posted there, they wouldn't be able to aim because of the smoke screen.

All other high vantage point could be eliminated for the same reason, and not many possibilities were left. The next most obvious would be the blind spots of rocks scattered all over the place. There wasn't any prominent large boulders around, but there were plenty that could hide one person. There was a good chance the sniper was deployed there.

However, that wasn't a threat to the vermillion haired girl. Shooting to kill her as she ran in the middle of a charging unit with a precise shot— that was impossible. First, there wasn't much chance for such a clear shot to arise. Even if they managed such a shot with miraculous skills, the girl could dodge it with her prediction. Even with Torway Remeon's skills, the best he could do was to cut down the number of soldiers running on the flanks.

With that in mind, there was just one place she needs to be wary of— above the steep rocky hill behind the enemy unit, which the Rising Sun Regiment referred to as the Third Block. The smoke had obscured the view, and snipers might have been posted on that slope. A big difference of that slope from the blocks on either side, was that her unit was going towards that place. As they get closer, the smoke would grow fainter, and it would be easier to fire upon them.

When they approach the block, getting attacked by snipers on the slope, and the units on the ground attacking while her unit was flinching— that was the worst situation the vermillion haired girl could think of. And her countermeasure to this was to move together with the two leading sections.

If the snipers were deployed in the block, then they would fire immediately once her unit was in range. Considering the poor visibility due to the smoke screen, she gauge their range to be less than 40 meters. That was a distance right before the ground units clash with each other, and the two forces would be in a chaotic battle right after the shots. In other words— if they didn't falter from

the first volley, they would gain the initiative in the melee battle. What should they do then?

There was only one answer. After the vanguard gets hit, the people behind just need to attack from a different angle before the sniper could reload.

「「「「「「「Wooahhhh!」」」」」」」

The two sections in front were the vanguards to bait the snipers to shoot. After they get hit, the three sections behind would go in to attack— that would be the plan if things went as expected. But there was no guarantee that this would happen, so the vermillion haired girl personally joined the two vanguard sections. There was a possibility that the snipers might see through their plan to 「bait out a shot and then attack」, and target the three sections behind instead. If that happens, then the two sections in front would be responsible for attacking. And of course, the girl was confident that she could dodge the first shots.

With her partaking in the battle, they wouldn't lose even if she charged into enemy grounds with a small number of troops— with this unwavering conviction, the vanguard charged towards the enemy, towards the hail of bullets raining down on them.

「——」

Forty two meters to the Block, then thirty meters. When they reach twenty five meters, the Luminous troops attacked. The girl judged at this point that her intention to bait out a shot had been seen through, and the attack would be directed at the three trailing sections. The two unharmed leading sections were now responsible for the main attack, and she charged right into the enemy from the front.

「Tch—!」

With two flashes, she used her 「deflect bolts」 technique to cut down the bolts flying her way, and slashed at an enemy soldier

blocking her way. Blood splattered, and the Luminous troops couldn't fight on even ground against this small elite unit.

The girl cut open a gap in their ranks with every slash— and that gap quickly lead to the final destination where the youth was waiting.

「…… Hi.」

Leaning on a rocky hill, the youth greeted her warmly for the first time in a while.

Her face was devoid of any emotions. Her crimson eyes were like glass balls without any feelings. Her dual blades were stained with the blood of her colleagues. Her body was dyed red after countless battles.

The youth narrowed his eyes. He wondered how intense the pain was that turned her into this miserable sight.

She didn't respond, close the distance in an instance, and swung her blades without hesitation.

Like the answer he gave in the past— Ikuta was just thinking about her.

Lop off the head with one strike. When the girl expel all her thoughts except for that, and was about to finish her swing— her body was hit by an impact, along with the familiar sound of air exploding.

「—?」

I'm dead, she thought. The girl's instinct told her so. The only thing that flew with that sound was a gunshot, and she felt her arms, knees, thighs and chest being hit. That could only spell death.

Clink, the sound of hard objects falling came from the girl's feet.

「——?」

She looked down on reflex— and what she saw made her gasp.

Seven to eight bullets that should have pierced her body was rolling on the rock.

「How's that, Yatori?」

With a cheerful expression that didn't match his pale face, Ikuta pointed above him.

「You thought the snipers were above us? Incorrect.」

He pointed in the opposite direction this time. The girl finally noticed— the sharp gazes of hunters were cast her way from the uneven sized rocks buried at the foot of the rocky hill.

「Welcome to the end of your VIP lane. Your gift for making it here— is our ambush.」

「— H-Hide here? Really?」

In the second afternoon of the defence battle, Torway opened his eyes wide at the ditch dug at the foot of the Third Block.

「Move the rocks away, set up a frame with planks, then cover it back with rocks. This is a delicate design that completely ignored the terrain. A lot of effort was put into this, so please make do even if it is a little squeezy.」

Ikuta boldly made an unreasonable request. In this dark space where he could only squirm forward, the youth tried his best to find the good points of this spot. There were several spaces to rest their guns, and could fit ten or so windgunners.

「But this place… has a narrow angle of fire. The peek hole is too small and deep, and can only aim at an enemy who arrive at just the right spot…?」

「That's what's so good about this. If you aim at Yatori, she would notice.」

The youth crossed his arms and grunted, then continued:

「I'm thinking about it the other way. Instead of aiming the muzzle at the target, we will bring the target to the muzzle. By reversing this

aiming order, it will render the superhuman attack detection of the Igsem useless.」

Torway who was under the rock didn't know what to say, and Ikuta smirked:

「I got the idea from your experiences! When you shot Yorunzaf Igsem, you kept your eyes close until the second before you fired to stop him from predicting your firing path. Since that method works, then masking the presence of the shooter will work too. In any case, just don't let the target know that someone is aiming at her.」

After hearing that explanation, the youth finally accepted this method. The youth then continued with a sigh:

「However, setting an ambush is a classic trick. It will fail if the opponent realize something seems off before detecting the presence of the sniper. Luring Yatori here would take a lot of effort.」

Ikuta said as he looked to the north, and tried to accurately imagine the battle that would occur in this terrain in the near future.

「Even so, it can be done if several conditions line up. As time runs short and the fight has become more frequent, she will definitely lead the charge here personally. Considering the constraint of the terrain, she will probably attempt a breakthrough from the front with a battalion. And once, me, the enemy commander shows himself, she will not have the luxury of altering her plans.

When that battalion breaks through the defenses, we will tie down part of their forces with a pincer attack. It will be easier to understand by saying that Yatori's platoon will be granted free passage. That should bait out a platoon isolated from the battalion, and if we worked a little harder, and made use of her expectation of the deployment of the snipers, we can further split her forces into sections. When she concludes that the snipers are on the slope of the Third Block, she would split the sections into the leading and trailing elements. Since she can deflect bullets, she will follow the

vanguard. If a melee battle breaks out here, with the difference in abilities between her and the other soldiers, she will be the first to reach me even if we leave her alone.」

After leaning his face close to the deep peephole, Ikuta locked eyes with Torway who was inside the trench.

「Yatori's wariness against the top of the block would become a cover for the ambush from underground. Even she won't expect us to spend so much effort on this trick.

And of course, she will see through 90% of our plan and intention. She will immediately know that we are luring her in, and snipers will be hiding somewhere in the battlefield. But that works just fine. If she isn't an opponent who can see through everything except the secret of this ambush, this plan won't work.」

His voice reverberated in the cramped space. Inside the equipment set up just for the vermillion haired girl, the two of them exchanged opinions on how to make the best use of it—

「Stop the battle! All Luminous troops, lay down your weapons and raise your hands high!」

The youth ordered with his voice raised high, and the sound of his subordinates dropping their crossbows erupted. The vermillion haired girl could feel the air of fighting fading behind her through her faint sense of reality.

「— You can come out now, Torway.」

The snipers crawled out from under the rock. The fire troopers who caught up with the girl opened their eyes wide at that sight, and they were even more baffled at the sight of her standing still. The vermillion haired commander stood stiffly before the battered enemy commandant, and they couldn't tell immediately what all this meant.

「There isn't enough space from shifting the rocks alone, and we ended up creating a slight bump, and looks a little unnatural on close

inspection. But the smoke made visibility poor, and I also covered it with our bodies. I knew how sharp you can be in seeing through traps, so I was worried until the very end.」

Ikuta scratched his head bashfully, and suddenly looked at the girl with a serious face.

「… How's that? Is this my win?」

He asked her directly. And gave his due respect to the dual blades that had persisted for the past centuries.

「We defeated the Igsem in our own way— can we agree with that?」

He didn't declare victory, and let the other party decide the answer.

The moment she heard the answer— the vermillion haired girl finally realized the reason why she couldn't move.

The bullets fired with low pressure didn't pierce her body, and it rolled onto the ground to emphasize that fact. She didn't need to check to know that she wasn't bleeding anywhere under her uniform.

However— the bullets still hit her.

「——」

It hit the Igsem within her. The crimson destiny that had been driving the girl all this time.

With her steel-like fortitude built on top of the conviction that she was the strongest, she couldn't dispute this result.

This was her loss.

The end of the dual blade's history after countless nonstop battles.

The future of the battlefield— would no longer depend on her, but would rest on the shoulders of these people in front of her.

「……」

The Igsem was silent, as if she was mimicking the formality of accepting the loss that wasn't accompanied by death.

On the other hand— Aside from keeping still, the girl couldn't think of what else to do.

There was only Igsem left in her heart. Everything else had been cut off and discarded by her. She had burned her humanity to ashes before coming here.

If the Igsem part of her fell silent— then what drives the body that's left?

「……」

The wind from the side made her vermillion hair flutter. The wind had just started changing, and the smoke lingering above them drifted swiftly to the west, and grew thinner.

At that moment, the girl realized someone was 「aiming」 at her, and raised her eyes on reflex. Four windgunners appeared at the top of the block above— After the smoke was cleared, they aimed their windguns with the open field of vision.

So there was an ambush above, she acknowledged without being fazed.

「—」

Something was wrong.

The muzzles— half of them were pointed at her, that was clear. But the other half? The angle was too steep if it was aimed at her subordinates. They were almost aiming right below, towards—

Before her brain reached a conclusion, her body moved.

「— Huh?」

She let go of her dual blades, and pushed off the ground. She reached for the youth's shoulder with her right arm and pulled him down. At the same time, she shielded the dumbstruck falling youth with her back, then extend her arms fully and stood still.

The sound of compressed air exploding echoed.

The four bullets fired downwards all hit the body of the girl.

The fabric of her uniform was shattered, and the girl unconsciously chased every broken piece.

「— Ah–」

As the shot that hit her lifecore shook her, she realized what she had done, and curled her lips in resignation.

「– Ahh– What is this.」

The girl smiled awkwardly from surprise– really now, just how stubborn was she?

It should have been completely destroyed. That soul had been grounded to powder, and tossed into the flames.

Not a bit of scrap of it was left, not even ashes— that should be so.

「– How stubborn, Yatorishino (me)—」

When she realized it, she found herself right there, as if it was only natural.

And protected her other half, as if it were as natural as breathing.

It took them four seconds to react and deal with the situation.

「— Above—!」

Torway returned fire the moment he detected them. Shots peppered the top of the block, and Luminous troops charged up the slope shortly after. They couldn't see from the ground what happened next. Long live the royals, long live Katjvarna Empire— the death throes of those puppets echoed out. But nothing entered Ikuta's ears. He leapt up from the ground, while the girl fell forward.

「Yatori—!」

Ikuta cried, and wrapped the girl with both arms. He forgot the pain of his leg wound and knelt on the ground to check her entire body— and his mind turned blank. One on the left arm, two on the

stomach, and one in the middle of the chest. Crimson blood were bleeding from the four small holes on her body.

「Ahh— Ahh—!」

Ikuta applied pressure to the wound on her chest in half craze. His palm could feel her erratic heartbeat, and blood splurt out from between the youth's fingers. His hands were immediately dyed red up to his wrist.

「Medic! Medic—!」

The medics from both camps rushed over when they heard the youth's woeful cry. On the other hand, Torway and his men turned and waved a white flag that meant they had no intention to fight, and rushed to headquarters to find Haro.

Ikuta snatched the bandages from the medics, and wrapped the wounds he could see. He pressed the bandage on her upper abdomen and chest, then secured it. He constricted her upper arm to stem the blood flow from the artery.

「Hah! Hah…!」

This wasn't any respite at all. He tossed aside his reason, and did everything he could to save the life that was fading away.

「— Your face looks terrible, Ikuta.」

The girl said in a tone that definitely belonged to Yatori.

The warmth had returned to her crimson eyes, and that she had regained her humanity, but the youth didn't feel happy at all.

「You can tease my face however you like! So, so don't close your eyes! I'm stopping your bleeding, I will take care of this wound…!」

Ikuta was driven by panic and kept moving his hands, and Yatori shook her head slowly at him.

「It's fine. This time, it's my turn.」

「Your turn for what?」

「We promised, didn't we? We have to take turns. So— this is fine.」

With that, she reached out for the youth's hand that was covering her chest:

「Stop. Look at me, and talk to me.」

Her eyes stared at the youth. Her gaze calmed the youth down, and he looked to the side… he then accepted the fact that he couldn't do anything before the stretcher came.

「… If talking can keep you conscious, then I can talk as much as you want. But I won't stop my hand, because I'm great at multitasking. So, what do you want to talk about?」

Ikuta continued applying pressure to the wound through the bandage and looked at the girl's face from close up. Yatori said with a smile:

「Thank you for meeting me.」

She bared her true feelings.

「On the first day of the exchange study— I still remember clearly how you all created that rainbow to welcome me. When I want to pass under it, it disappeared, then appeared again when I backed away. It was so fascinating, anxious and beautiful— and it's funny how everyone is drenched.」

That memorable image appeared in their minds. Ikuta remembered that he was completely drenched too.

「And also how we stole ingredients from the kitchen. That was the first bad thing I did, and my heart was pounding out of fear of Grandma Mari finding me out. It's all because you told me that we will get turned into breakfast if we failed.」

The girl smiled. The youth still remember her stiff manner of speech when they first met.

「I still remember joining your family for lunch. I said the soup taste great, and Aunt Yuka praised me for discerning the taste of the dried fish stock. After dinner, we all made pumpkin paste cake. A dessert that tasted sweet and soothing.」

The youth recalled too. He blew on the freshly baked paste cake and eat it, and end up burning is tongue.

「I remember clearly how we argued over a difference in opinions. Uncle Bada then started assigning missions to us, and in the beginning, we keep on failing. But we slowly got hold of the trick behind it, and when the mission went as planned, it felt so interesting—」

Clashes of opinion. Stubbornly going at odds at each other, and the growth we experienced behind it.

「That time when we defended a cabin and fought with wolves, it is all so vivid to me. I thought I might die, but when I made the declaration that I would definitely get you back alive, you called me stupid and got mad. We promised back then that we would become two parts of a while and fight together.」

There were no expiry date on the promises between children. From that day on, this was a contract that would never end.

「I also remember you attempting to abduct me and take me away from the Empire. In order to tempt me into depravity, we played all sorts of dangerous games. Tricking con artists, setting up traps for tricksters. It was like an extension of the adventures we had when we were young, and it made me really happy.」

Their student days which they devoted entirely to playing with fire. Bright days that were filled with worries.

「And that time you picked out clothes for me in Sheui-san's shop too. That Sari was so beautiful, and it hurt you so much when it was ruined on the same day.」

He was at his wits' end and descending into madness, while she accepted this end calmly. From that moment on, the youth reviewed his attitude towards Yatorishino Igsem in a fundamental way.

「The incidents after the formation of the 『Knight Corp』 was unforgettable… Escaping from the Kioka territory back to our borders, and saving Princess Chamille who almost got kidnapped— The Shinnack unrest in the Northern Territories, and serving as rearguard to fend off the Aldera Holy Army and the 『Phantom Unit』… Fufu, and that's just half of our exploits—」

Yatori's eyes were losing focus as she kept talking, and Ikuta forcefully interjected:

「I know, Yatori. I know all that. Because I was with you throughout all that.」

The girl's eyes that were looking at the past was dragged back to the youth.

「— That's right. You have always been by my side. You joined the army you didn't want any part of, and was made a hero against your wishes. But you still stayed by my side.」

「Isn't that only natural? You are my other half.」

When she heard Ikuta say those words with a tremble, Yatori nodded deeply— and looked towards the dual blades on the ground.

「You are right. So— before it disappears, take all of this with you.」

The girl unbuckled her belt, took out the short sword sheath on her right waist and proffered it to the youth.

「I'm giving you the short sword as a weapon for self defense. You can do whatever you want with the saber, keep it or give it away. And also—」

She opened the button on the pouch on her waist. Her partner sprite Shia fell onto the ground, and looked worriedly at her mistress that was in the youth's arms.

「I will leave Shia in your hands, and if she is willing… Let Princess Chamille become its next mistress.」

「Stop, Yatori! It will be a long time before a next mistress needs to be chosen, it will be troubling for Shia if you bring this up now!」

The youth spoke over her to refute the girl. Yatori said with a strong gleam in her crimson eyes:

「Ikuta— please. From now on and in the future, please protect that girl.」

「——」

「You don't have to protect the country. Nor the Third Princess. But that girl— that girl named Chamille, you have to keep her safe. Cherish her on my behalf too.

And… If possible, give her happiness, and have plenty of sweet dreams. Because she had been forced to see nightmares she didn't want to see all this while…」

The girl's voice slowly lost its strength. As he gripped her hand and tried to pull her back from the darkness, the youth shook his head violently. He tossed aside all reason and wailed like a child throwing a tantrum:

「Don't wanna, don't wanna! Didn't I tell you before!? If I'm not with you, I can't do it…!」

Gripping his hand with a force weaker than a baby, Yatori shook her head.

「You and I are two in one. Intertwined and merged together, without any boundaries. We will be together in the future too. Won't you say that— this isn't scientific?」

The youth stubbornly refused her gentle conclusion. His face was covered in tears, but he still kept talking to her.

「I promised— Mama. When you are trapped by the bounds of fate, I will stop you. I will take your hand and lead you towards happiness.

Please, Yatori. Live on with me. Don't make me break anymore promises…」

The girl desperately searched for the words to respond to his request— and many scenes flashed across Yatori's fading consciousness.

Part of her childhood spent in the Rising Sun Regiment. Her interaction with the white robed Scientist. The dining table in the Sankrei house. Haro's smile. Matthew's poker face. Torway's timid smile. Princess Chamille's pouting face. The bright days she spent together with her companions in the Knight Corp.

And in the center of it all, the dark haired youth trying to act dumb.

「… You can hold your head up high, Ikuta.」

At the end of her vivid memories, Yatori smiled confidently and told him— the answer was right here.

She met important companions, trustworthy superiors, cute friends and built bonds with them.

Until the end of her life, she spent it with her other half who shared her soul.

There was no reason to hesitate. She only had experiences to be proud of. Right now, she could puff up her chest, and rebuke the pity Lucika Krukk showed her that night.

「You kept your promise.」

The girl assured him. She told him there was nothing he needed to regret, and he had completed his objective.

Staying by the youth's side, Yatorishino Igsem lived more happily than anyone else.

「——!」

Ikuta said something, but it didn't reach her.

Her five senses ceased to work one after another. In the looming darkness, she let go of her boundary and relaxed her entire body.

Melt into him— and continue dreaming there, Yatori thought.

After raising the white flag and telling the soldiers to ceasefire, Torway sprinted to the headquarters. The shallow cave wasn't too far away, but it wasn't easy to meander through the chaotic battle between friend and foe— when he reached, he raised his voice and called for Haro.

With the receding frontlines, the important personnel had to move too, and they had already made the preparations. Princess Chamille was present too, and after spending a few seconds to think about the situation, Torway decided to take the girl along with him.

The third line of defence was barely holding, but since the Igsem soldiers had broken through from the middle, the area around the cave was no longer safe. The only safe retreat route was to the top of the First Block where the Emperor and Chancellor were, or the side of the Third Block. Since not returning to Ikuta and Yatori wasn't an option, the youth decided to escort the Princess over.

They left the cave, and ran together with the medics carrying a stretcher. Matthew whose right leg was fractured was carried on the back of a burly subordinate, Princess Chamille also took Haro's hand and ran. The ominous feeling was pushing everyone, and they kept moving as if to refute this feeling. The short distance seemed ten times as long.

「Ik-kun! Yatori-sa—」

The instant they reached their destination, everyone understood it was all over.

——————————!

Ikuta was screaming. He was crying woefully with the body of the vermillion haired girl in his arms. He cried out her name in a hoarse voice amidst sobs.

The blood pooled around them was enough to end a person's life.

The girl who was lying down with eyes closed felt so peaceful that they couldn't sense any life from her.

「—」

Torway dropped his windgun onto the ground.



Haro covered her mouth with both hands.

Matthew stopped breathing.

Chamille collapsed onto her knees.

「— Ahh—」

The hundred lines of apologies she had prepared were forever lost in her heart.

She couldn't apologize anymore, or be forgiven ever again.

Those hands— would never comb her hair anymore.

The wind direction changed, and the smoke lingering in the air drifted westwards.

In the clear evening sky, the youth kept crying out the name of his other half.

Epilogue

In the end, it was Major Nudakka Megu who issued the retreat order.

The vermillion haired girl didn't return, and he lost all hope. Deciding not to fight anymore, the Major withdrew all the forces in the blocks, set up camp some distance away from the Remeon force, and relayed the intention of a ceasefire and willingness to negotiate with the other two units.

After that, no one took different sides like before. Tending and moving the wounded became the top priority, and the groups pooled together their supplies and manpower, tired of the infighting and deception. The soldiers were relieved that they could render aid to the wounded without needing to differentiate between friend and foe.

Torway took command of the Rising Sun Regiment search team. Ikuta was in no condition to lead, so his comrade took over his post, planned for the return to central, and executed it.

A problem arose between them and the Igsem, about what to do with the girl's body in Torway and company's custody. Major Megu wished to return her to the Field Marshal in the Hunger Castle, but Ikuta refused to hand over the body. Despite the confrontation, Major Megu was too exhausted to fight again, and compromised after saying: 「Promise me that you will treat the body with respect.」 Even without that reminder, Torway's group took great care in preserving the corpse with the ice from many water Sprites.

After continuously leaving the wounded in towns and villages along the way back, all the forces started heading north. As the three forces coordinated with each other, the return trip was uneventful. It remained so after leaving the Dafuma Province, and the search teams went straight for central.

The Remeon faction went to the capital Banhataal, the Igsem forces headed for Zalulu Hunger Castle, and the Rising Sun Regiment returned to their base in the Miogaroki Province.

「What happened to the commandant?」

After welcoming Torway's group in the Rising Sun Regiment's home base, the first thing Major General Saba asked was for the person that should be here.

「Because of an arrow wound to his leg, Ik-kun had fallen ill. It's not life threatening, but his fatigue that accumulated from his lack of sleep had caught up with him. Let's take care of the regiment while he is recuperating.」

Torway pretended to be calm as he explained. He was barely putting up this front.

Everything would crumble with a momentary lapse— the youth knew that, and sealed his emotions as he led his comrades… No one else but him could do so in the Knight Corp.

Hearing Torway avoiding the most important bits in his explanation, Major General Saba crossed his arms and groaned:

「… Hmm, that's true. It's fine for him to rest for now, the situation is now set.」

After learning that the Emperor and the Chancellor were in their hands, the Major General decided on the next course of action.

「We march on the capital.」

He concluded firmly and wisely. Marching into the capital with their army and return the Emperor to the throne— this process was a ceremony in itself, and gave legitimacy to their actions. An edict issued from the palace held much more weight than an edict issued from some dubious location.

The Remeon faction had seized control of the palace right now, but they lacked the decisive King in a chess set. Major General Saba plans

to give them this missing piece of the puzzle in exchange for favorable terms.

<TL: Raw uses Shogi instead of chess.>

「The General will definitely accept this, the Empire is out of options now.」

Torway and the others nodded stiffly. Ending this in a draw with the Remeon faction having the upper hand was their goal for this coup. Given their current position, they had a good chance to realize this goal. Even with Ikuta incapacitated, they would still push steadily towards this goal.

「……」

Princess Chamille stared blankly at the group, as if she was looking at the scene from a faraway nation.

「Here, Princess…」

She didn't leave her seat after the meeting ended, and only started walking when Haro took her hand. She had no other way of staying sane other than to stop thinking like this.

After negotiating with the Remeon faction, the matter of the Rising Sun Regiment entering the capital was settled in no time. Four thousand soldiers marched into the capital, and half of them set garrisoned in the palace. In order to maintain balance with the Remeon faction in the palace, this was a necessary measure.

「… To think that you would be the ones to return with His Majesty…」

In a corner of the courtyard where the territory of the two forces overlap, General Remeon said to Major General Saba and the officers of the Rising Sun Regiment. He looked half bitter and half resigned. Ever since Lucika Krukk died in battle, the wrinkles from exertion had grown on his face.

「— To be honest, I can't tell if this is the result of the obstruction we faced or the help we got. But I do know that this situation was beyond what I could handle.」

The General said with complicated feelings. After accepting the cooperation framework with the Rising Sun Regiment, they had settled the matter of sending forces to the borders that might get invaded by Kioka. And with that, the Igsem faction garrisoned in the Hunger Castle couldn't continue their forceful attitude. The situation was finally stabilizing.

「That's all in the past, father. The important thing is, how we will work together from this point forward?」

The youth answered after looking at his father straight on. His determined attitude gave the jade eyed general the illusion that their position had been reversed, and he shook his head with a bitter smile.

「You don't have to tell me that, righting the policies in the Empire is my goal too. However…」

General Remeon clenched his fists and lowered his head.

「My only regret is that I didn't eliminate Trisnai Izanma with this chance. I am shocked by what you told me… To think he had such a trump card.」

Major General Saba agreed with his frustration.

「Stopping all the Sprites in the Empire, huh. When the other ministers were still alive, he probably didn't reveal it to avoid any confrontation. And of course, there's a high chance that this is just a bluff.」

The two generals shared the same feeling of outrage, as if a bone was caught in his throat. General Remeon looked around him, and suddenly sighed deeply:

「… Even though we are sullying the palace with our presence right now, it doesn't change the fact that we are soldiers. I don't plan to indulge in political struggle in the future, and devote myself to my duty of national defence.」

Half that was to keep the other party in check, and the other was his sincere wishes. He then turned around:

「In conclusion, what we need now is an edict. You guys think of a way to make that fox issue an edict too.」

There were many manors in the palace for royals and grand nobles to stay in. Most of these residences had lost their owners after the coup, but remain in perfect condition with almost no damages. That was proof that the Remeon soldiers didn't pillage the place, proving what they did was purely out of concern for the nation.

Ever since the Rising Sun Regiment entered the capital, Princess Chamille was placed under tight protection and stayed in one of those manors. She was assigned a room that was far too large for one person to stay in.

「How are you feeling today, Your Highness?」

Haro who was taking care of Chamille combed her bed hair and asked her. The Princess kept her peace. Her eyes stared into space, devoid of any emotions.

「We spent quite a number of days without any change of clothes, so I'm really glad that we don't have to worry about that after returning to the capital. There are plenty of clothes in this house, and all the clothes for both men and women are incredibly luxurious. I want to try them on, but I have to hold back since I'm still on duty.」

Even though the Princess didn't say anything, Haro still kept talking. She couldn't just ignore this silence that must not remain empty.

「Even if I want to try them all, I don’t think many of them are my size. You see, I’m really tall, right? I would always trouble the tailors when I visit their shops.」

Haro kept talking for the sake of the girl before her, and also to deceive herself. Because she didn’t need to think when she was talking, so Haro fled in that sense with all her might.

「… Where is, Solork?」

Her efforts were mercilessly blocked by what the Princess said. Her mindless chatter stopped, and Haro put on a farce cheerful attitude and replied:

「It seems— he can’t move freely yet. Because he took an arrow to his leg.」

The Princess knew that the injury wasn’t the problem. Haro observed the girl’s face, and asked gently:

「Do you… want to see him?」

Princess Chamille turned pale at that question, then held her head and shook it violently. Haro quickly hugged her from behind, and the girl’s shivering didn’t stop for a long while.

After ten or so minutes, the Princess who was seated on the edge of her bed manage to stop her trembling, and stood up. Seeing her stare out the window blankly, Haro realized that she wasn’t of any help at all. She also realized that the girl wishes to be alone.

「… I will make tea, be back in 30 minutes.」

She couldn’t leave that girl alone, but it would be pointless if the Princess alienate her. As a compromise to this dilemma, Haro left and entered the girl’s room multiple times. When she said thirty minutes, she would return in half an hour with tea she had brewed. Stubbornly keeping her words were all that Haro could do for the girl now.

「……」

The Princess spent time meaninglessly alone in her room. She focused on not thinking and keeping her mind blank, that was the only means of self defence she could manage.

「You seem to be upset.」

The malicious Fox cut off her last way of retreat.

「—?」

When she turned back, her mouth was covered by someone. The eerily cold palm made her break out in goosebumps.

Pressing her against the wall, Trisnai smiled.

「That won't do, they didn't perform a proper check. Secret passages are a must for the manors of grand nobles after all. Without Ikuta Sankrei and Yatorishino Igsem, even if everything looks fine on the surface, there would be flaws in the minute detail.」

When she heard those names, the Princess shivered— and hatred started burning within her. The girl knew why she was in this situation. She knew whose minions attacked those two at the closing moments of the final battle.

「Mmm—! Mmmm—!」

Her mouth was covered and she couldn't speak. Seeing the rage in the girl's eyes, Trisnai sighed depressedly.

「Don't blame me. This is a painful decision for me, and ended fruitlessly too.」

The Fox said without missing a beat. His unreasonable logic made the Princess struggle.

「Why are you making that face? Yes, that's right. Yatorishino Igsem aside, I have no reason to kill Ikuta Sankrei. Because he is useful, and it is only natural to want the son of Bada Sankrei to be the mental pillar of the army after the Igsem's downfall. In fact, I had been planning to do so all this while. You liking him played a part too.

I was so eager on doing that too, since I failed to convince the father, then I have to recruit the son.」

Trisnai shrugged with a face of self mockery, and lamented with disappointment.

「But, he won't do. He is an excellent soldier, but he is incredibly insolent. A watchdog masquerading as your guardian, he doesn't know his place at all. How arrogant, a mere tool of violence lecturing the Princess who descended from 900 years of Katjvarna royal bloodline!」

Naked fury burned in his grey eyes, and the two of them stared at each other with rage.

「Mortals have their places, and rulers have theirs. That insolent man attempted to teach you the happiness of mediocrity, and had no intention of guiding you towards the throne. He was using sophistry to claim that living as a normal girl is the greatest happiness. That should be punishable by death— I deeply regret my failure to eliminate him.」

The Fox twitched his lips and snorted. The sight of him humiliating the dark haired youth made the anger in the girl reach its peak. She felt despair over the fact that she couldn't spit out fire from her mouth, and kept flailing around.

「Mmm—! Mmmm! Mnnn—!」

「Since they noticed my intention to kill, the next chance won't come so easily. I thought there would be a chance when the unit was on the move, but he is protected like an iron wall, so my pawns can't go near. Coming to you is much simpler, how ironic.」

「— Mmmmm——!!」

The Princess groaned, and tried to push away his arms. The force bordering on madness made the Fox ask baffledly:

「Ara, please wait, Your Highness. It's fine to hate me, but you have no reason to do so, right? The results are contrary to my expectations, but leaving one dead and one alive should match your wishes, correct!」

The girl stopped moving suddenly, and the rage in her eyes slowly turned into fear. Trisnai didn't hold back and fished out her real thoughts, that she had stubbornly refused to face.

「You hate Yatorishino Igsem. Isn't that so?」

「——」

「That's right, I know. Just like me in the past, you crave for Ikuta Sankrei. Getting hold of the heroic figure that would be the next watchdog is a move that befits a ruler. I'm impressed by all this, including your eye for talent.」

After lavishing the Princess with praise, the Fox sighed deeply.

「However, your methods are too lenient. It was fine up to the point of approaching and getting him to your side, but you should eliminate any people in your way immediately. She had placed complete trust in you, so there were tons of ways for you to do so. Why didn't you put them into action?」

The Princess couldn't answer, her body still stiff. Even though she was free to speak, she still feared the dark side of her heart.

「No— of course I understand why. You have not awakened yet, the mysterious bloodline passed down the royal Katjvarna has not shown itself truly. How disheartening. The centuries of rot had tarnished the luster of the bloodline of kings.」

Trisnai lamented exaggeratedly, and the next moment, and the light returned to his eyes.

「But there are flashes of them showing. You have definitely shown the tip of a ruler's prowess. That is the reason why I split the

army and created this catastrophe, which is the strong medicine needed to awaken you.

Oh right, do you know the result of the coup? The Remeon faction is teaming up with the Rising Sun Regiment to suppress the Igsem and declare themselves the official Imperial Army. Unfortunately, I have no interest in keeping mongrels as watchdogs. I have to dismantle this collusion of theirs— hmm, I wonder what scheme I should use?」

The Fox said cheerfully, like a child planning a field trip. The gulf between his facial expressions and his words sent a chill down the girl's back.

Sensing that the other party was reeling, Trisnai smiled.

「Do you understand? — That's right, if you won't awaken, I will do this again, and at a bigger scale. Splitting the army behind the scenes, and drawing in threats from overseas. The entire nation will be sent into turmoil, and I will present the most terrible scene for your viewing pleasure.

You might not notice, but I held back this time. Why do you think Kioka had not taken action for so long?」

Whenever Trisnai's words entered her ears, the girl felt a stir in her heart like rumbling lava— she must kill him. Kill this man. Not just a villain in the court, but a disaster on humanity. An extremist born out of the rotten blood purged from the royal bloodline. Before he satisfy his twisted desire, no one could stop his violent treachery.

「Who should I propped up as the enemy next? Ikuta Sankrei fought valiantly, but from how he is now, it's unlikely for him to rise up again. It will be great if a hero that can replace him appears, but it will be terribly one sided otherwise… Hmm, I'm not so confident about the Empire surviving next time though?」

Princess Chamille roared inside her heart— Alright then.

They were started as lies within this bloodline. Unwanted children born from corruption and rot.

If you insist, game on then.

「It seems— you intend to awaken.」

Seeing the resolve in Princess Chamille, the Fox smiled gleefully. He took out a piece of paper from his pocket, and stuff it into the girl's hand.

「Listen well— leave your room at midnight, and move through the palace as per the instructions on the paper. Don't take anyone with you, you have to go alone.

Walk to the end, and you will know what you need to do.」

With that, Trisnai removed his hand from the girl's mouth. He looked at the girl who was coughing violently with sparkling eyes:

「I'm looking forward to this, my dear Chamille. I'm looking forward to see the moment when you truly shine.」

The Fox slipped into a gap between the furniture, and disappeared into the darkness.

Later that day, at midnight.

Sensing from the moonlight that it was time, the Princess opened her eyes on her bed.

「……」

She was already dressed. The girl took care to be quiet as she got off her bed, and walked to a corner of the room with her soles sticking close to the floor. Her goal was the gap between the furniture. She leaned in and looked at the darkness that the Fox disappeared into, and stepped in timidly.

When she almost reached the wall, an opening appeared to her left. The wardrobe that looked like a rectangle actually had an opening at the back, leading into a passageway. There was a squarish hole inside, that lead into a stairs downstairs.

The girl walked down the hole, and felt something like a ladder on her shoes. She groped her way down, and soon reached the bottom. She looked around the dark and found the spot where moonlight was shining through a gap.

The girl pushed hard, and could feel the wind coming in. She carefully walked out from the small gap.

「— Okay.」

The girl walked into the courtyard lit by moonlight. She recalled the map that she had burned, and continued advancing.

The Princess climbed down a nearby well and entered a hole that lead into an underground corridor. Whenever she encounters a ladder or stairs, she would move between the ground level and below ground, hiding between the trees in the courtyard to evade the searchlight of the patrolling Luminous troops, and crawl through the hole at the corner of the walls.

After passing through the last underground passageway, the girl noticed the familiar decor.

This was the restricted zone.

It didn't take long for her to reach the Emperor's chambers through the secret passageways.

「——」

When she realized it, she was already standing before the Emperor's bed.

Things were going scarily smoothly. It wasn't because the soldiers were slacking off, but the route here was just too good. There were many places that could only be traversed because of her petite stature, even boys her age would have difficulty passing through. The path from the restricted zone to the chamber was so cramped that it might as well be meant for cats.

Maybe I went through the escape path for children in reverse— the girl thought as she looked towards the table by the bed.

A knife was placed there carelessly.

It was true. She knew what she needs to do with one glance.

「……」

The girl looked at the bed again. The bedridden Emperor was there, but his personal Sprite was gone.

It wasn't clear what trickery he used, but this was probably arranged by Trisnai. Right now, the Emperor was as defenceless as a newborn babe.

He really went out of his way to set this up— the Princess thought as she trembled dumbfoundedly.

「……」

She looked at the Emperor before her again. Aside from his frail chest rising and falling, he was not too different from being dead.

Before he was turned in both body and soul into a puppet, he was an ugly man. Lecherous and foolish, and had a terrible temper.

She knew he was her father. But she never thought of him as one.

If she had to describe it— the girl thought that body was part of the rot.

How refreshing it would be if she could cut off this rot.

「……」

The girl thought about what she was about to do.

For example, fratricide. Or maybe, regicide.

She shook her head. Both weren't wrong, but was far from the core essence.

「……」

When she bore hatred towards her father, she would always hate herself too.

When hating the Emperor, she would hate the Third Princess.

It was the same in her hatred for Trisnai Izanma. With her uncle that inherited the same blood as her mirror, she could see how difficult it was for her to salvage this rot.

Her endless hate towards her bloodline, was also boundless grudge towards herself.

「…… Ahhh.」

There was no point in being troubled, the girl concluded. She realized the essence of what she was about to do.

This was suicide. Or self harm.

The only way of cleansing herself, for someone who was born filthy.

「……!…」

A youth once said this answer was wrong.

But Ikuta Solork was always accompanied by Yatorishino Igsem.

Ikuta's heart belongs to Yatori. Yatori's heart belongs to Ikuta.

She felt the way they lived was very precious. And she shouldn't touch them with her grubby hands.

However— when realized it, she was absolutely bent on taking the youth.

「— Ahh–」

She couldn't cry. She didn't have the right to cry.

Because she was the one who wanted to take him away. Since her wish came true, she had to be elated.

How foolish. How despicable. How unsightly.

As the descendent of the rotten bloodline, this way of existence suited her just right.

「—」

With a heart filled with hatred, she grabbed the hilt of the knife tightly with her right hand.

The girl vowed that her path from now on wouldn't have any justice.

Kill her father. Kill her uncle. End the bloodline of the Eternal Sprite Tree. All this was fueled by hatred. She had no rights to fight, to defend or salvage anything.

Because she had already trampled over the most precious thing in the world.

「——!—」

She couldn't cry. She couldn't. No tears. The expression that befit you wasn't a crying face.

The girl raised the knife high in a reverse grip. Her left hand resting on top of the hilt gripped by her right hand.

It would end once she stabbed it down. It would begin. She would forever lose the reason to hesitate.

So laugh, laugh heartily. A laughter more cruel than the Fox. More than anyone in the world.

Laugh!

「— Ahhh!」

Two in the morning. It all began with a sudden Jewel Voice Broadcast.

「Announcement, the Emperor has passed on.」

Those asleep woke with a start, those awake opened their eyes wide in surprise. All the soldiers in the palace were in an uproar.

「The 27th Emperor Arshankrut Kitra Katjvanmaninik has passed on.

All citizens of the Empire, please mourn for His Majesty who have returned to the Maker.」

Why now— there were many doubts. It wasn't during the period he went missing, or when captured by the third forces, why did the Emperor passed away, now that he was back in the palace?

「At the same time, in accordance to the rules set by the Imperial law, the next Emperor will be announced.」

The soldiers grew tense, ready to accept the coronation of their new lord.

「The 28th Empress, is the Third Princess Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik.」

Everyone wondered if they were mistaken. No one expected that name.

Not the First Prince, Third Prince, or First Princess— but the Third Princess.

「I repeat. The 28th Empress, is the Third Princess Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik.」

With no regards to the strange content of the broadcast, the Sprites continued speaking calmly. They spoke as one together in the capital shrouded in the darkness of the night.

「The ceremony to congratulate the coronation of the new Empress will begin now. All those in the palace are to report to the White Saint Hall.」

After the coronation at 2 am in the morning. Was the celebratory ceremony at 2 am in the morning, it would be more difficult to find anything normal about this. Despite the confusion in their hearts, the soldiers started moving. They tried to follow the protocol in this unusual situation, and after some thought, it was decided that the commander level officers from both factions should report to the White Saint Hall.

No one knew if this was the right protocol, there had never been a coronation celebration ceremony attended only by soldiers.

「… We seek an audience with the Empress.」

After announcing that stiffly, General Remeon walked through the doors of the White Saint Hall. The first thing he saw was the red

carpet leading to the throne. Torches were lit on either side of the carpet, and the flickering flames added an air of mystery to the dim and wide space.

「C-Can we come in…?」

Matthew who had clutches in both hands entered timidly, then Torway, Haro, Sazarf and Major General Saba followed behind. To them, this wasn't the time to be bothered by ceremony.

「Princess…? Are you here…?」

Haro looked into the darkness and asked. Torway and Sazarf stood to the side with tense faces, they could only see the outline of the throne in the dim passageway.

「What is troubling you?」

A voice echoed in the passageway for the first time. Those who recognize this voice grew stiff.

It might sound a little different, but that was definitely her. A crucial difference.

「Come closer. All those in the palace— that was my order.」

The tone she used to address the soldiers had the dignity of a ruler, like a king that had ruled for dozens of years. She had never shown this side of her before. The intelligence that didn't match her age, and a childishness expected of someone as old as her— These should be the traits of the Princess.

「Princess Chamille……?」

Torway waved aside his dissonance and walked forth to look carefully. That figure on the throne slowly came into view:

「Not Princess. Correct yourself right now, Torway Remeon.」

The youth stopped in his tracks. A few seconds later, the soldiers behind him also opened their eyes wide in surprise.

The blonde girl on the throne was wearing all black without a single trace of any other color. Her blouse was as dark as the feathers of a

crow, her dress was like the embodiment of the night, and her coat was as dark as the abyss of the void. For the celebration of the new Empress' coronation, this looked too out of place.

「… Your style of dress is astounding, Empress Chamille.」

He was baffled, but General Remeon still followed her wishes and addressed her by her title. The girl leaned against the hand rest of the throne, and nodded with her lips curled.

「Be it dusk or dawn, death comes to all who are due. Even the Emperor.」

Her dangerous words made the soldiers gasped. She was obviously implying something with that.

「Let us celebrate then, and resist the night. All lives would come to an end, so let us celebrate the funeral in advance.」

The girl said as if she was singing, and rest her hands on her black clothes. She had no intention of flaunting it, and declared this as her formal attire.

「Forgive my insolence, but I beg to differ. Your Majesty's brilliance will last for eternity.」

A voice came from behind the soldiers. They turned around, and the strangely pale smile of the Fox appeared before them.

「So you have awaken. Fuhu— I am truly blessed. In the forty years of this Trisnai's life, there has been no better day than this.」

Trisnai seemed mesmerized as he said that, and genuflect before the throne. The girl was still all smiles.

「Your congratulatory words might be cliche, but it isn't bad. Fox, come here for your reward.」

Trisnai responded to his summons and approached the throne. The girl looked down casually at the Fox prostrating before her:

「Your nails are really long.」

She stated out of the blue, and took one of his hands.

「I will shorten them for you.」

The girl pinched the nail on Trisnai's index finger, and peeled it off

「～～～～?」

The Fox exhaled soundlessly. The girl nonchalantly pinched the second nail.

「What a troublesome vassal. Can't you even groom yourself?」

Rip! A line appeared on his torn skin, and Trisnai threw his head back in pain.

「Hmm? What's the matter, why aren't you saying anything? I'm trimming your nails personally, you know? You should be filled with joy, so why aren't you lavishing me with praise?」

She peeled off the third and fourth, tossing them to the floor. The Fox was foaming at the mouth.

「Still keeping quiet, huh. How insolent… How insolent!」

The girl peeled off the fifth nail with her thumb, flicking it straight onto Trisnai's face. When she let go of his hand, Trisnai collapsed with his palms on the floor. His fingertips on right hand that lost all its nails were pink and bleeding profusely.

「— Hah! Whizz! Hah……!」

When the intense pain in his numbed brain subsided a little, Trisnai wiped his drool away with his sleeves, and slowly stood up with a smile.

「It is, my great honor.」

He said with sweat all over his face. The girl smiled again and said:

「Begone. You have the stench of a despicable critter on you, it irks me.」

He was completely humiliated. As the soldiers watched on in shock, the fox threw his head back with his hand on his forehead, and didn't look angry at all.

「Fufufu! Fuhahaha…! I beg your pardon, I will cleanse myself carefully before meeting Your Majesty next time!」

Trisnai bowed gracefully, turned, and left the White Saint Hall. Matthew, Torway, Haro and Sazarf could only watch speechless as all that unfolded.

「Okay, the sideshow is over. Let me hear what you have to say.」

The girl shifted her gaze back nonchalantly, sweeping her gaze across all of the soldiers. Seeing that no one had answered her, she snorted arrogantly:

「The era of the puppet-like Emperors is over. I order you to speak your mind without any reservation. That is the gift that I want. General Remeon, Major General Saba, give me what I wish.」

The two of them who were named looked at each other. The girl raised her voice at the two confused men:

「I'm telling you to report on the problems that I need to solve. Come on, don't waste time!」

With that shout, the officers started racking their brains. The series of strange turn of events gave the girl control of the situation. The ceremony turned into a war council, and the soldiers spoke timidly to the newly crowned Empress in black.

「——Fu.」

The girl scrowled the corner of her lips in a smile. That terrible smile came naturally to her.

Imperial Year 907, Third Princess Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik was coronated as Empress.

When future historians discuss the first Empress in 180 years, they would always include the term 「destruction」—